

A PRINCE OF DARKNESS

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH"





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A PRINCE OF DARKNESS.

A Novel.

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN,

AUTHOR OF

‘THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH,’ ‘A DOG WITH A BAD NAME,’
‘THE VAGRANT WIFE,’ ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON :

WARD AND DOWNEY,

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A PRINCE OF DARKNESS.

Prologue.

CHAPTER I.

“STARVATION’S a deuced unpleasant thing, Madeline.”

“Yes, dear, so it is.”

The first speaker was a man of about thirty years of age, with a thin dark face, to whose keen eyes and clear-cut features a life of shifts had given a hungry hawk-like look. And the submissive answer came from the lips of a woman in whom the virtue of submission was evidently not natural but acquired; a tall massive woman, with a commanding figure, and a beautiful fair face whose long gray eyes could look shrewd as well as soft,

and round whose red lips there were already indications of future lines of resolution as well as passion.

Her gentle tone of sympathy jarred upon his savage sullen discontent.

“Yes, dear, yes, dear!” he repeated impatiently, mimicking her. “Is that all you have to say? Don’t you know what starvation means?”

“Yes, Louis,” said she submissively, rising from the armchair in which she had been indolently sitting, and crossing the room to him as he sat by the table staring fixedly out of the window and across the courtyard to the opposite side of the hotel. “It means no food and then death, doesn’t it?”

“Those are the first and the last stages, but there are many others—worse ones—in between.”

“Are there?” she asked indifferently, as she went down on her knees beside him and laid her head softly against his shoulder. Then, as he moved impatiently, she added in a pleading voice: “Don’t be angry with me, Louis, for not being frightened enough

at the prospect. By-and-by, when you are gone out and I am sitting here alone in the dark, then I shall remember what you said, and I shall feel it and perhaps I shall cry ; but while I am with you all sad things seem to fall on my ears without any meaning, and nothing but your unhappy face can make me unhappy or seem worth troubling about. So you see, my husband, it is not because I am stupid that I don't mind the thought of starving ; it is only that if I die in your arms I don't care what I die of."

The man turned and examined her face in cold curious wonder. His passion for her had died out months ago ; the monotony of her unswerving affection bored him, and the cynical knowledge that it was entirely undeserved made him look upon the too generous giver with contempt rather than with gratitude. The extravagance of her last assertion, which he did not for a moment believe, attracted his attention.

"Do you mean to tell me, Madeline, that it is nothing to you whether you live on a first-floor on the Boulevard Malesherbes, as

we did three months ago, or exist like condemned criminals in one little dingy cell with scarcely room to turn?"

And he glanced round the room—a little unpretending bed and sitting room combined, which hardly deserved his savage criticism; though everything in it, from the tarnished gilt clock, which did not go, to the velvet-pile carpet, whose blue roses and crimson leaves had lost all their startling originality, betrayed the taste of the past.

"No, Louis, it is something to me where we live, because it makes so much difference to you."

"Oh, as to that," said he, throwing himself back in his chair and assuming a careless tone, "of course it is a mere matter of custom. If I were used to second-floors and cheap restaurants, I dare say I should like them."

He was not looking at Madeline, or he might have read in her face an expression of contemptuous incredulity, such as he would not have believed her capable of showing after any statement from his lips. But

during the twelve months which had elapsed since her hurried marriage with Louis de Breteuil she had learnt a good many things which that gentleman prided himself on keeping secret, and she knew perfectly well that the prosperity he had enjoyed since she first made his acquaintance, and which had continued until within three months of the present time, had been preceded by a period during which even second-floors and cheap restaurants were luxuries beyond his reach. She had never dared to question him as to the sources of the wealth which had so suddenly come to an end; indeed, she accepted that mystery, as well as certain other facts mysterious only to her, with a placid acquiescence proceeding partly from indolence, partly from ignorance, and partly from faith. Thus, while the ease with which the brilliant Louis had managed to obtain a firm footing in a certain fast but exclusive set in Parisian society was a common topic, the circumstance that it was only the gentlemen of this set whom she ever met woke no suspicion in the ingenuous young English-

woman, who, belonging by birth to the lower middle class, was easy to deceive on any point concerning that vague "society," the curious improbability of whose sayings and doings, as recorded in the literature of her own class, had often surprised her. She had a beautiful home, handsomer dresses than almost any of the ladies she saw at the Opéra, in the Bois, or at the races, and she had Louis—or at least as much of Louis as his many engagements would allow. And these engagements grew ever more numerous, as a man's are apt to do as the honeymoon fades into the past. But his empire over her was too strong for her to complain; and never having been a spoilt woman, she consoled herself for his neglect by the pride she took in his position. For Louis de Breteuil had taken the world of Paris by storm; had cut out the young Parisians by his skill in riding, driving, love-making, by the quality of his horses, the cut of his coats, the daring of his speech; and had become the Admirable Crichton of the frivolous life of the boulevards. Nobody knew more about him on his

first appearance in Paris than that he was a French Canadian whose fortune, left him by an uncle, was derived from oil-springs in Pennsylvania ; but the general ignorance concerning his antecedents, his name, and his title, had weighed lightly in the balance against an unmistakable distinction of appearance and manner, and a certain unaffected sincerity of cynicism which dazzled the laboriously wicked golden youth of Paris, for ever striving towards an ideal of depravity which their little wits find as hard to reach as ever anchorite found his ideal of sanctity.

Louis de Breteuil's reign, if short, had been glorious : and the audacity of his abdication was worthy of the brilliancy of his throne. For, instead of waiting until the tide of his prosperity had run out, and vanishing with debts unpaid and the reputation of a ruined swindler, De Breteuil had announced his intention of visiting the East—which is a vague term, and suggestive of the splendour with which his name was associated—had given sumptuous farewell entertainments, had paid enough of his bills

to leave the impression that it was failure of memory and not of money which caused him to leave the rest unpaid ; had sold his furniture, his pictures, his horses, dismissed his servants, and taken his departure, leaving behind him a reputation bad indeed, but for which half the well-born young men of Paris would have given ten years of their abortive lives. He wanted to be further away from his late acquaintances than any ship could take him ; so, instead of going to the other side of the world, he went to the other side of the Seine, lived the simple life of a poor *bourgeois*, and, when the summer heat grew too intolerable in the little room on the second-floor, he would take Madeline for a few sous on a steamer to St. Cloud, without one fear that the humble couple trudging along in the dust should be recognised as the brilliant De Breteuil and the woman whose toilettes had been envied by every other well-dressed woman in Paris.

If, in carrying out this transformation, his temper had proved worthy of his intellect, De Breteuil would have been heroic ; but the

feat of accommodating his mind, as he did his habits, to circumstances, was just a little beyond his powers, and was left to Madeline, who wore a cotton gown, made by her own hands, with the same natural majesty which had attracted all eyes when, at race-meeting or review, she had come straight from the approving inspection of Worth.

Now, as she knelt beside Louis' chair, listening to his gibes at second-floors and cheap restaurants, she looked like a queen in exile, while he seemed to have sunk already to the level of his present position, and to bear the stamp of adventurer on his stooping shoulders and haggard hang-dog face.

"Well, Louis," she said, after a pause, "we shall dine well to-day at least. I think Mr. Staunton is rich, I am certain he is generous. I am sure we shall enjoy ourselves, and I love St. Germain."

Mr. Staunton was an Englishman who, with the freedom of a foreigner, had gone from Paris to St. Cloud by steamer two days ago, had made acquaintance with De Breteuil and his beautiful wife, and had begged them

to come and dine with him when and where they pleased. St. Germain had been chosen by Louis as a place where, in this, the beginning of July, they were not likely to meet stray wanderers from the idle world.

“Ah, yes,” said Louis, with some animation at the mention of their new acquaintance ; “it is getting near the time when he promised to call for us. You must get ready, Madeline, and—and you may make yourself beautiful once more—put on one of the handsome dresses you have so nobly laid aside lately—no one is likely to see us, and you must show your countryman what French taste can do for English beauty.”

When Mr. Staunton arrived, and Madame Louis, as she was called in the hotel, swept down the stairs towards him in a cloud of delicate lace which showed here and there, as she moved, a fold of dainty shell-tinted silk, the Englishman, unprepared for this transformation in the woman whose beauty had already made a strong impression upon him, looked upon her with a worshipful admiration which De Bréteuil noted keenly. All through

the long drive to St. Germain Louis said very little, leaving the talk almost entirely to the stranger and Madeline ; but at dinner he woke up into sudden liveliness ; his animation affected his companions, and Madeline, as she saw him enjoying himself once more, grew fairer with the happiness which sparkled in her eyes and glowed in her cheeks. And when dinner was over, and De Breteuil told her to sing to them, the first soft notes that fell from her lips put them both under a spell of listening silence.

It was at the Pavillon Henri Quatre that they were dining ; their table was drawn up close to a window that overlooked the sloping hill and the quaintly-cut box and yew-trees of an old-fashioned garden. Madeline sang first some lively French chansonnettes, glancing from time to time at Louis with instinctive affectionate coquetry ; then letting her eyes wander out to the evening beauty of the landscape below, she broke into the tender old melody of "Home, sweet Home," which she sang through with feeling which kept the Englishman at least spellbound, gazing at

the beautiful singer with admiration which was almost devotion. And still De Breteuil watched him.

Madeline's voice quivered on the last notes ; as she ended, Mr. Staunton's enthusiastic thanks almost startled her. Louis nodded to her and glanced at the door.

"Go and put on your bonnet, my dear. Mr. Staunton must see the terrace."

With an uneasy glance from Louis to the stranger and back again to Louis, she obediently left the room.

When she returned, Mr. Staunton alone was waiting for her. The expression of easy good-humoured enjoyment which his face had worn throughout the day had disappeared ; he looked so cold and so grave that Madeline stopped short in the doorway, and glanced round anxiously in search of Louis.

"Where is my husband ?" she asked quickly.

"M. Louis will join us, madame, if you will do me the pleasure of starting with me towards the terrace," said he, with curious

stiffness. "He was much struck with a horse on which a gentleman has just ridden up to the hotel, and he followed it to the stables to ask if it is for sale, I believe."

"Ah," said Madeline, "animals of all kinds are my husband's passion. A horse that nobody but himself can ride, a fierce dog that nobody else dares to approach unless it is chained up, seem to understand and obey him as if they were human; and I think Louis loves them better than if they were." The last words she uttered rather bitterly.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Staunton, with grave interest; and there was a short pause, during which they sauntered on towards the terrace, both thoughtful and preoccupied. "And so this is a little trouble to you, this fondness of his for animals, which takes him away from you a good deal, perhaps — riding — and driving?"

She looked up at him in some surprise. What there had been of sternness in his face a few minutes ago had given place to a kind, sad look of compassion and sympathy, which suddenly brought the tears to her eyes and

made her stop in her walk for a few seconds. She recovered herself, and went on, involuntarily hurrying her steps a little.

“Yes — no,” she answered nervously. Then, stopping again, and looking straight into his face with her frank eyes, she said, “You think I am unhappy, I see, and that I am jealous of my husband’s love for his horses. I am not, indeed; I—— What makes you think I am unhappy?” she asked, in a different tone, with curiosity and suspicion.

Mr. Staunton had stopped too, and he was answering her questioning gaze with a look as frank as her own, full of deepest pity—pity that surprised, alarmed her, and brought the blood to her cheeks. He hesitated, as if debating desperately within himself whether he should tell her something. But he turned away sharply, muttering, in a voice too low for her to hear distinctly, “God! I *can’t* tell her!”

“What are you saying? what do you mean?” Madeline asked abruptly, alarmed, but retaining her dignity.

Instead of answering, he asked her another question : “ Have you any friends in France—in Paris—madame ? ”

“ Friends ? No—o ; at least, I know—I knew—I have met a good many people, but I can hardly call them friends.”

Her hesitating answer seemed to him pathetic. He spoke more gently than ever.

“ Forgive me, madame, if I say things that pain you. I am almost old enough to be your father ; and to see a young lady so friendless——”

“ Friendless ! I have my husband,” she interrupted sharply. “ And what can a woman want more than a good, loving——” She checked herself, and, facing him again, asked slowly, “ What has he been saying to you ? Ah ! I know—I can guess ; I was afraid of that,” she faltered, in a lower voice, losing her self-control. “ He told you that, now we are poor, we shall have to live apart for a time, did he not ? He has hinted it to me, but never dared to say it outright ; he is so afraid of wounding me, poor fellow ! Was it not that ? ”

Mr. Staunton did not answer. "You are very fond of him?" he asked, after a short silence.

"Oh yes." The reply was given in such a low voice that it sounded like a soft sigh.

"Ah! And he is very fond of you, of course. Don't be angry with me for my impertinence—or what you, no doubt, consider my impertinence."

"Oh no, indeed I don't," broke in Madeline, with a shrewd unmirthful little laugh. "I know the world and the people in it better than you think. There are gentlemen, friends of my husband, whom I have to receive and talk to, whose very look is an impertinence; and I have learnt to be discriminating. I will listen to whatever you have to say. I will answer any questions you like, for I know that you are kind, I know that you are—good."

Mr. Staunton promptly took advantage of her permission, and said simply: "You have been married before, madame?"

She looked rather astonished, but answered

at once : “ Yes. Three years ago, when I was nineteen, and a teacher in a school, I married a man named Meredith.” She paused ; but as her hearer was evidently much interested, continued : “ He was a clerk on the Stock Exchange. He was not kind to me : he drank, and neglected me, and wanted me to go on the stage, which I thought was wrong, so I would not go ; and he complained that I was hard and cold and selfish, though that was the only thing in which I would not obey him. And then, when we had been married eighteen months, he disappeared ; and by that time,” she went on naively, “ he had made me so very unhappy that I did not try very hard to find him. And then at last I learnt that he was dead, and I married M. de—, I mean my present husband, and he brought me over to France, and then for the first time I learnt what it is to be happy.”

“ And you are sure your first husband is really dead ?” asked Mr. Staunton slowly.

“ Oh yes. I saw the announcement in two

papers, and I heard all about it from Louis besides."

"From Louis, your present husband, you say?" significantly.

"Yes."

But there was no suspicion in her eyes, and again Mr. Staunton found himself unable, voluntarily, to call it up there. He looked away from her for a minute, and then said: "And so you are afraid that soon you may be forced to separate for a time?"

"I—I am afraid so," tremulously. "At least, Louis *has* hinted that."

"And what will you do?"

"I don't know—yet. But I have been used to earn my own living, and I have learnt some French, and I am not at all a helpless woman. And, with the thought of helping to form a home some day for Louis and me, I feel that I shall get on—yes, further than seems possible now," said she, with a quiet bright resolution which deepened alike Mr. Staunton's pity and his admiration.

"I quite believe that; I am sure you would meet any trial, no matter how severe,"

said he, with emphasis, "in the most courageous and high-hearted manner. But the world is very hard for women, and although I know that many brave girls do struggle on alone and successfully, still the battle is much less hard if they have friends in whom they can trust. Will you trust in my friendship?"

Madeline fixed her long grey eyes thoughtfully upon his face. She was an experienced judge of faces, and a very short examination of the kind brown eyes, iron-grey beard, and the lines and furrows worn by nothing baser than time or trouble, satisfied her. "Yes," she answered simply.

"Very well. Then I will give you my private address in England." He had taken some letters out of his pocket, and having found a spare half-sheet of paper, was writing on it with a pencil. "And, in case you should want any help or any advice sooner than you expect, I will let you know just where I shall be for the next fortnight. You see," and he gave her the paper, "that for the next few days I shall be at Lyons, and

after the 8th I shall be at Turin for a week. I should like to be able to stay a few days longer in Paris, but I am a stockbroker, travelling with valuable securities which I must deliver in Turin by the 9th; and I have some business to do in Lyons before then."

"You are a stockbroker!"

"Don't look so shocked; I am not one of the very worst."

"Oh no, no; but——"

"Ah, of course. Your first husband was in a stockbroker's office, you say; Meredith, I think you said his name was. Is—was he on the House himself?"

"Yes, I believe so. Yes; I am sure of it."

"Is not that M. Louis on the other side of the road?"

They had turned, and were walking back towards the hotel. Madeline had time for more questions before they rejoined him.

"Have you any daughters, Mr. Staunton?"

"No. I have only one child—a boy of thirteen."

“You are very fond of him?”

“Very. They say I worship Gerald.”

“Gerald Staunton,” she repeated softly.

“I wonder if I shall ever meet him?”

“I hope so. In the meantime, remember, if you are in any difficulty, write to me; I am a widower, and have no one to interfere with my correspondence. If you want my presence I will come, if I can.”

Madeline glanced in terror at Louis, who had marvellously sharp ears. But as they crossed the road slowly to where he was standing, cigar in mouth, looking at the sunset between the trees, he did not appear to see or hear them. She said hurriedly to her companion, in a low voice:

“I cannot thank you; I am sure you don’t expect to be thanked, for you are good because you cannot help it. But I have been praying God that some day I may meet your darling son, and be able to do him some kindness, or some service to show you I am grateful. I know I am not likely to have the chance; and it sounds silly to tell my feeling, doesn’t it?” she added timidly.

“No, my dear young lady. No man can have too many friends, and I am thankful to have made another friend for my boy,” said he kindly.

Madeline felt, when Louis became aware of their approach, and they all walked back to the hotel, that there was an awkward constraint between the two men; and this feeling grew so strong during the return drive that she felt quite relieved when the victoria stopped at the *porte-cochère* of the dingy third-rate hotel where she and Louis were staying, and when, with a warm pressure of the hand, Mr. Staunton looked into her face kindly and gravely for the last time. She did not notice his parting with Louis, for something in the Englishman's pitying face had suddenly woke a pang of horror and fear in her heart that made her turn quickly away and hurry upstairs.

She reached her room, lit a candle, and pored over the half-sheet of scrawled addresses almost reverently with glistening eyes. Suddenly the paper was taken from her, and, looking up with a cry, she saw Louis, who

examined the scrawl carefully, and then folded it up and put it in his pocket. Then, still without speaking, he got a writing-desk, placed it on the table before her, drew the inkstand forward, and put a pen into her hand.

“Now write what I tell you,” said he very gently, laying his hand upon her shoulder.

“My dear sir——”

She wrote obediently, with trembling fingers.

“Can you fulfill your promise, and come and see me? I would not trouble you, but my need is urgent—and it has indeed come soon, as you prophesied——” dictated he.

She wrote the first few words in stupid, timid, unreasoning submission. But as he spoke the words, “My need is urgent,” her hand stopped.

As soon as he noticed that she was not writing—for his eyes were fixed on the opposite wall as he arranged the sentence—he shook her by the shoulder. “Well, go on, go on.”

Then she turned her head slowly and in

fear, and looked up into his face in heartsick wonder.

“What does it mean? What is it for, Louis?” she asked, in a husky guttural voice.

“Never mind. Write as I tell you.”

She hesitated a moment more, shaking from head to foot. Then, with a great sigh, as if she found it hard to draw breath, she wrote.

“What a scrawl, my child! Never mind. Now sign it, ‘Madeline.’”

She did so, and he passed the blotting-paper over it, took it from her, wrote one word at the top of the page—it was the name of a place she had never heard of—folded it, put it into an envelope, and dictated the direction: “M. Stanton, Hôtel Collet, Lyons.”

She made one outcry as he put the pen again into her hand. “Oh Louis, for God’s sake tell me what it means!”

“It is all right, you shall know presently, my darling,” said he. “Now you are tired; you had better go to bed at once. I came up without finishing my cigar; I think I

must run down and have one in the courtyard."

"Louis—one moment. I don't understand. You must have overheard——"

He laughed as he patted her shoulder good-humouredly. "Well, I confess it. When I went to join you, I felt a little jealous to see how well you and the Englishman seemed to be getting on together; so I followed you pretty closely, and you know I have sharp ears; and when I saw you almost whispering to him as you came towards me, I thought to myself that I would play you a little trick to puzzle you, and punish you for exchanging so much as the shadow of a confidence with anyone but your husband."

He gave her a long kiss which filled the loving woman's eyes with light and life. But through all the happiness which his unusual tenderness woke in her, she did not forget to whisper, "Oh Louis, thank God, thank God! You need never, never be jealous with me. And your punishment was too hard. That note—I—I don't know what mad fancies it filled me with!"

And he laughed at her and kissed her again ; and she clung to him and forgot everything else for the moment in the joy of feeling his reviving tenderness. But when he had gone down-stairs for his cigar, ugly misgivings would rise again to trouble her.

CHAPTER II.

MADLINE was far too submissive by habit to think of disobeying any injunction of Louis'; therefore, as soon as he had left the room, she went to bed, and dutifully tried to go to sleep. But here her well-tried faculty of passive obedience broke down; that note that Louis had forced her to write puzzled and frightened her; her husband's explanation that he had made her do it for a trick seemed lame and unsatisfactory, as she thought over the incident with the terrible clearness with which night shows us all things evil. Yet the very suggestion that he could have had a serious purpose in dictating to her that urgent appeal to Mr. Staunton caused her to start up cold and shuddering, and to rush to the door, and, crouching beside it, listen intently

for Louis' footstep, in wild longing for his presence to dispel a great fear.

But he did not come. All through the night she waited and watched, and the active business of the day was in full swing before she fell asleep, her last confused thought a presentiment of coming evil. Broad daylight brought a sharp knock at the door, and the sight of Louis' handwriting on the note, which the waiter handed her on the tray with her morning coffee, was so suggestive after the night's reflections, that she said to herself before she touched it, "He has deserted me." Then she tore the envelope, and read the letter twice through very quietly.

"My darling Madeline," the note ran, "I know you will be delighted to hear that I have most opportunely and unexpectedly found some employment which, though it is not of a kind to make our fortunes rapidly, will at least relieve me from the terrible trial I have suffered lately, of seeing my sweet queen deprived of the dainty luxuries which beauty has the right to demand. The nature

of my employment I will explain to you on my return from Havre, where I shall be for the next three weeks; I need not tell you that it is nothing unworthy of a gentleman, yet my pride of birth made me hesitate to avow to you that for your sake I had condescended to do a clerk's work for a clerk's wage. I enclose you some money—all I have; I will send you more when I have *earned it*. Strange words for a De Breteuil to use! Do not mention my degradation—alas, my pride still calls out!—to any one. Bear up; I shall clasp my darling in my arms again before long. Adieu, my divine one—no, *au revoir*.—Your adoring and devoted

“LOUIS.”

The letter was in English, which the accomplished De Breteuil spoke and wrote as easily as French; enclosed were two ten-franc notes.

Madeline felt, on reading this letter, as if all her love for her husband had suddenly disappeared, and given place to a very hearty

disgust with his hypocrisy and selfishness. She was such a clever woman that the instincts of her passionate affection could not always stifle the conclusions of her reason ; moreover, having already had one bad husband, the simple artifices by which a poor fellow tired of his wife tries to satisfy her and exonerate himself at the same time were not unknown to her. She did not shed one tear over the eloquent effusion which proved to her conclusively that her second venture had been little better than her first, and then she wondered how it was that luck in this matter of marriage was so strangely against her. She thought the matter over before her looking-glass, sitting down deliberately in front of it and criticising herself very dispassionately indeed ; it was a review that could not be anything but favourable, for her beauty was almost faultless, of a well-known English type, that of the large, fair-skinned, brown-haired woman, with gray eyes, dark eyebrows and lashes, and a nose just not straight enough to be severe.

“I am very handsome,” was her con-

clusion, while her face puckered up at last as if she would like to cry. "I wonder why I can't keep a man fond of me, when I am so fond of him as I am—no, as I *was* of Louis! I wish I had a turned-up nose; women with turned-up noses are talkative and amusing, while I am like nothing but a great silent stupid doll."

She did herself injustice; she was not stupid. Her feelings were dull this morning after the keen excitement of the night, and reflection on the subject of man's perfidy had already carried her as far as she could go; so she looked at the two ten-franc notes, mentally added up the hotel-bill she would have to pay at the end of the week, and considered her position. She was a middle-class girl, an orphan, born to economy, trained to self-dependence; her recent prosperity had not lasted long enough to destroy certain valuable instincts of thrift and self-help, and a way out of her embarrassed financial position soon evolved itself out of her more sentimental reflections. She unlocked two large trunks which occupied a considerable

space in the room, and took out two or three of the handsome dresses which formed their chief contents. For a very few moments she stood lost in the brilliant dreamlike life of love and idleness which the costumes which she had worn during that period recalled to her; then she rang the bell and asked if Mdlle. Rosalie could spare her a few minutes.

Mdlle. Rosalie was the head chambermaid, a shrewd, shrewish-looking elderly person, a quick surface-reader of character—especially bad character, and yet with a certain world-wise strength in her face at times which was not unattractive, and which justified Madeline's choice of her for a confidant. Her appearance on her entrance was not encouraging. She had mentally labelled "M. and Madame Louis" on their first arrival respectively "knave" and "fool," and there was a certain expression of cheerful and triumphant malignity on her face as she looked round the room, and said brightly, "Madame va bien ? et monsieur ?"

"My husband has been called away sud-

denly from Paris on business, Rosalie," said Madeline, with some dignity. "And as he has gone away for my sake, to make money for me," she continued, repeating Louis' lie with lips which she could scarcely keep steady, "I want on my side to spend as little as I can during his absence; and as I have no friends in France, and I know you are a woman of experience who can help me if you will, I sent for you to ask if you would mind telling me how to set about it."

"And so monsieur has gone away!" cried Rosalie, raising her eyebrows in exaggerated surprise. "And left madame behind him to economise by herself, which is dull work at the best of times." But just then madame's dignity began to show unmistakable signs of giving way, and the dry old Frenchwoman softened a little. "Ah, madame, these husbands who can't be content with one wife, however young and pretty she may be, they are people it is best to have nothing to do with. I never did," she added unnecessarily. "And how can I be of service to madame?"

I will most willingly if I can," she added, with some kindliness.

"Thank you. Can you tell me where I ought to go to try to sell some dresses? I have some very handsome ones that I have only worn a few times, and that I shall not want again," she added, as Rosalie looked at her curiously.

As she finished speaking, Madeline raised the linen cover she had flung over the dresses she had taken out of one of her trunks, and displayed to the keenly-appreciative eyes of the old Frenchwoman a tempting pile of silk and satin, heavy brocade and delicate lace, at which they both gazed for some moments, not without reverence.

"Ah, yes, that is the dress madame wore yesterday," said Rosalie, venturing to lay a diffident brown claw on one of them when her black eyes had taken note of every fold. "It is very beautiful."

Madeline opened the trunk again, and drew out another and more showy costume, with much red and gold, which had had a *succès d'originalité* at Auteuil. Rosalie's intelligent

face lighted up suddenly at sight of it. "Ah!" escaped sharply from her lips.

Madeline looked up. "You have seen a toilette like this before?" she asked, trying to speak carelessly.

"No, madame; I have only heard of one toilette like that," answered Rosalie, whose sharp eyes had noted every golden tassel, every embroidered flower, on the crimson velvet underskirt.

"Indeed! and what toilette was that?"

"It was one worn at the races three months ago by the mistress of the millionaire, M. de Breteuil."

Madeline had been prepared for a recognition, and had stood trifling with the drapery of a skirt, ready to parry a question or to listen to an exclamation. But there was one word in the chambermaid's speech that struck her dumb; she had sometimes wondered what was the position assigned to her by her husband's friends, but never before had she heard her degradation taken for granted. She remained silent for a few minutes, and Rosalie, whose respect for her had evidently risen much

higher since the discovery that Madame Louis was the woman whose beauty and magnificent toilettes had been the talk of Paris, began to fear that she had been indiscreet.

“Madame may rely on my discretion,” said she, with an elaborate air of mystery; “and if, indeed, madame wishes to dispose of these beautiful dresses, I can do so easily by saying that they came into my hands through your maid. I—I had heard,” she continued, “that when M. de Breteuil started for India, madame went with him; therefore I did not expect ever to have the honour——”

She paused. Madeline’s face had suddenly changed. She had intended to correct the mistake into which Rosalie had fallen, by assuring her that she really was De Breteuil’s wife; but these last words told her that Louis had not been recognised, and after a moment’s struggle she resolved to keep faithful to his wish to remain unknown.

“Did you ever see M. de Breteuil?” she asked.

“No, madame. I recognised your marvellous dress, because I had seen it at the

modiste's. I have a cousin who is employed by Madame Euphrasie. But is madame sure she will not need these dresses again? I know very well that ladies of madame's position do not wear their costumes more than a few times; but still, it seems a pity to part with a dress like this——"

"I shall not want them again," said Madeline, shuddering. "I wish to sell them, to realize all the money I can, to take some cheap and quiet rooms, and to live by teaching. If you cannot help me——"

"On the contrary," broke in Rosalie vivaciously, "I can help madame in all these things. I know Paris well. I can recommend madame to some charming apartments in the house of a friend of mine, and to a school where an English governess is required, if madame really means to condescend——"

"To earn an honest living," finished Madeline very quietly.

Rosalie heaved a deep sigh, and looked at the young Englishwoman with puzzled pity. "Ah, what a man!" she murmured enthusiastically, after a moment's pause. "What

stories one hears about him, his magnificence, his devilry ! And all the while I know one little thing about him which would make people speak of him so differently.”

“ And what is that ? ” asked Madeline.

“ Ah ! madame must excuse me. A secret about a person in the great world is valuable property sometimes ; and when M. de Breteuil returns from his travels, and settles in Paris again, I may perhaps make use of it. Most of these great gentlemen have a leaf turned down in their history, they say, which they would willingly tear out altogether. However, that is not our affair at present. I will serve you to the best of my power, madame, and charge you but a reasonable commission.”

Madeline had no choice but to trust her ; and finding that the woman did, as far as she could tell, keep her secret and deal fairly by her, she took two humble rooms in the course of the next few days over the cigar-shop of an *ex-vivandière*, who was the friend Rosalie had recommended, and set about obtaining employment as a teacher of English.

She was surprised to find how easily she

had got over the wrench of parting from Louis ; a few weeks ago, the mere thought of a temporary separation, such as he had told her those mysteriously altered fortunes of his might render necessary, had seemed to her only less horrible than a threat of a living tomb. She could not understand herself. Was she cold after all, she wondered, as her first husband had said, that she could take so calmly the desertion of a man she had loved so much ? Her calmness, if she had but known it, was the clue to the puzzle. The excitement of her passionate devotion to her husband, the torments of repressed jealousy she had suffered as his ambition for popularity seemed to take him further and further away from her, the culminating madness of her devotion when reverse of fortune gave him again to her and her only, and carking disappointment at the discovery that her love could not make him happy, had worn the woman out until nothing but the embers of emotion seemed left in her. The necessity of work gave her passionate heart rest ; and she devoted herself to the details of the sale of

her dresses, of her installation in her two shabby rooms, and to the search for pupils with a sort of pleasure which amazed her. The remembrance of Mr. Staunton's kindness, the letter Louis had made her write, the strange fears she had had about it, scarcely occupied her any longer except as a vague dream-like incident that had passed and had no connection with that life which at present seemed so very narrow to her. She would work very hard, and she would do all the good she could ; for she had a *bourgeois* feeling that the luxurious life she had led for the first ten months of her second marriage needed some sort of expiation.

But the calm did not last long. On the fourth evening after Louis' departure, she was passing by the hotel where she had stayed with him, when she saw him standing in the *porte cochère*. She stopped short, the blood rushing to her head, and making it throb, and dimming her sight. She was on the other side of the road, and he did not look up ; but she knew that he saw her, for Louis saw everything and everybody, and it was one of

his amiable characteristics to let his friends pass him, to save himself the trouble of a salutation. Madeline's love had flashed into full life at the first sight of him ; but even as impulse urged her to rush across the road to him, reason, waking too, told her that to do so would be to put herself again at the mercy of a cold and selfish tyrant, who did not want her, and who would make her pay a heavy price for his toleration of the infirmity of her affection. After a struggle with herself so short and so sharp that it was only like one agonizing pang, she stepped forward to continue her walk ; then Louis looked at her with an expression which was in reality simply one of astonishment, but to her dazzled, blinded, remorseful eyes it seemed eloquent with reproach and wounded feeling. In the same moment it struck her that he looked ill, and pale, and anxious ; and as she reached his side she whispered humbly, slipping her hand into his, and looking into his eyes with the simple devotion of a dog, who does not concern himself with the faults of his master :
“ Forgive me.”

Louis nodded at her magnanimously, though he had not the slightest idea for what she asked his forgiveness. She put her arm through his, and led him in the direction of her new abode.

"I have had to take two cheaper rooms, Louis. I am afraid you won't like them, for they are rather small and not very well furnished," she said, with some anxiety.

"Oh, well, you know I am not particular," said he heroically. And she assented to this with inward doubt.

"Where have you been, Louis?" she asked, looking up at him affectionately. "You have been disappointed in the work you went away for."

She felt his arm tremble for a second, and he said sharply, "What do you mean? What makes you say that?"

"Why, you said in your letter you would be in Havre three weeks, and you are back already."

"Too soon, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, of course!"

The joy that thrilled the woman's low voice as she uttered these words with a lazy

laugh full of intense unspeakable happiness made it plain that she wanted no explanations, that the fact of his return was enough for her. Still he explained, with great care, deliberation, and clearness.

“I learnt on arriving at Havre,” he said, “that the correspondent whose place I had gone to take was able to return much sooner than he had expected, so that, finding my occupation gone, I came back at once, eager to see my darling ; but found, to my surprise, that you had left the hotel.”

Madeline said nothing ; she was in a passion of self-reproach at her suspicions of him ; she could only press his arm silently, and, as they had now reached the house where she lodged, she hurried him affectionately upstairs to her little sitting-room on the top floor, lit the lamp, for evening was closing in, and took up a basket with which she always did her marketing.

“Now,” said she, as she put a chair to the table for him, “I will leave you to enjoy your paper, while I go and get something nice for supper in honour of your return.”

She kissed his forehead tenderly, and left him. But away from the enchantment of his actual presence, doubts crowded again thickly in her mind. She began to perceive that it was not love which had brought him back to her ; that even in his reception of her enthusiastic welcome his toleration of her was even colder than it had been before : perhaps it was poverty, perhaps it was custom, but it was not affection which had restored him to her ; and she knew Louis too well to suppose that it was duty. The thought of Mr. Staunton flashed again across her mind, but then—— Thank heaven ! Louis had come back poor, so her fear that he would work upon the Englishman's kindness was proved groundless. And again the old hope that her devotion might win the whole of Louis' heart woke up in her, and she rejoiced in the power her early training had given her of working for him now that reverse of fortune had dulled for a time his energy and his spirits. Inspired by the proud feeling of being able to do a little towards repaying her husband for the happi-

ness he had been the first to make her taste, she indulged in an extravagant outlay for supper, and returning home, went upstairs with a soft tread, thinking she would surprise Louis by her speedy return. So she stole on tiptoe into her bedroom, took off her bonnet, and crept up to the looking-glass to arrange her hair by the very little daylight there was left.

In the midst of the flutter of bright excitement into which her little trick had thrown her, she was startled by hearing a sound like a deep groan from the next room. For a few moments she stood still, comb in hand, listening ; but she heard nothing further more alarming than the noise of a chair being pushed back a little way. But the fright, slight though it was, had damped her spirits, and it was with a slower hand that she took off her walking-dress and felt under the dressing-table for her slippers. She could not at first find them, and as she stretched her arm out further in the search she touched something close against the wall. Drawing it out, she saw in the faint light that it

looked like a man's shirt, rolled up and fastened with a pin. Her first impression was that it had been forgotten under the dressing-table by a former occupant of the room; but just at the moment that she instinctively took the pin out, the door opened so suddenly that she uttered a little cry of surprise as Louis burst into the room.

"Who's there?" he called, in a loud harsh voice.

"It's all right, Louis; it's only I—Madeline," she said, astonished by the sharpness of his tone and by a wild scared look on his face as his eyes seemed to flash round the darkening room.

His glance then fell upon her as she sat on the floor in deep shadow.

"Get up, then; get up. What are you hiding away there for?" he asked sharply.

"I am not hiding, Louis," she answered gently, and was moving to get up when he caught sight of the object in her hand.

"What have you got there?" said he, and, stooping, he snatched it from her.

As he did so, with grasp not quite steady,

the shirt unrolled itself; and with horror which seemed to stop her breath, Madeline saw that on the cuffs, the front of the collar, and far up on one of the sleeves, were great dark stains.

“What is it? What is it?” she asked, in a broken guttural whisper, after a minute’s silence, during which, with a curse, De Breteuil had rolled it up again and tried to thrust it into one of his pockets.

“It is nothing—nothing. At least, if you must know—— But no, it would only frighten you.”

“Tell me, tell me!”

“Well, don’t be frightened. As I was walking by myself the day before yesterday in a lonely place, near a wood, I was attacked——”

“Attacked! By a man?”

“No, no; by a wolf.”

“At Havre!”

“No. The fact is, I have deceived you, My reverse of fortune, my inability to provide for you, had driven me half mad, and I resolved to commit suicide. I drove to St.

Lazare, took the first train that started, found myself in the morning at Nevers ; I took another train to Autun, which I know well, where there are woods, where I thought I would shoot myself quietly. I was attacked, as I tell you, by a wolf, and in defending myself, my instinctive clinging to life woke again. I came back to Paris, not intending to inflict my wretched presence upon you."

"Then those marks—those stains—are blood?" she interrupted fearfully.

"Yes, yes ; but only my wrists—nothing serious. Don't be alarmed."

But she was not reassured ; some horrible thought had taken possession of her. She got up, and without a word more walked, with undecided, staggering steps, and with the fumbling slowness of a half-witted person, through the door which led into the sitting-room. De Breteuil half called to her ; but as she paid no heed he began humming an air with hard forced liveliness, and did not immediately follow her. When he did so, she was sitting with her back to him at the table, poring over the newspaper as he had done.

“ Well,” said he cheerfully, “ any news ?”

But as he laid his hand on her shoulder she felt the touch of it grow suddenly heavy : for he saw what it was that she was reading, and knew what significance she gave to it. It was a paragraph which ran as follows :

“ The name of the English gentleman who so suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from the Hôtel Collet, Lyons, on Tuesday, after leaving word that he should return in time for dinner, has been ascertained to be Staunton or Stanton. He is said to have had property of value with him, and it is conjectured that he may have met with foul play. He was last seen at five minutes past two on Tuesday afternoon at the railway-station of Neuville——”

Neuville ! Madeline read no further : it was the name Louis had scrawled on the top of the note he had made her write to Mr. Staunton. In a moment she understood the horrible share he had forced her to take in a scheme of appalling cowardice, treachery, and ingratitude. There was complete silence in the room for a few leaden moments ; then she

raised her head and met De Breteuil's shifting, sidelong look, and he read the terrible indictment in her eyes.

For all the man's audacity, the opinion of others floated or sank him; now that this woman knew his ghastly secret, and showed her abhorrence in her face, his features wore the hunted, degraded look of the coward and the cut-throat. He could not meet her wild eyes, and after standing for a few moments restlessly before her, he suddenly turned, snatched up his hat, and slunk out of the room towards the staircase. He had gone some steps down when a hoarse whisper from above stopped him.

"Louis, where are you going?"

"I don't know. And what is that to you, as long as you get rid of me?"

His voice was low, hard, reckless, the voice of a man in the lowest stage of abject hopelessness. A pause, and then he went down another stair.

"Louis!"

"Well."

"You will let me know where you go?"

“ No.”

“ Why ? why ?”

“ The woman who can turn a man off just when the whole world is against him does not deserve that he should remember her.”

Her apparent reluctance to part with him, even now, was causing his self-esteem to revive, and his voice was not without grandiloquent sonority.

“ Louis, I did not turn you off—I don’t turn you off. Come back. I am your wife ; I will comfort you, save you. It was only that—that—I was so happy—to have you back ; and then the change was so sudden—and so dreadful ! Come !”

For an instant he tried to assume a dignified attitude of hesitation, but the offer was too evidently one not to be refused. He turned, slunk up the stairs, and shuffled back into the sitting-room. There at last a spark of gratitude was struck out of the craven nature, and he fell, sobbing and murmuring incoherent thanks, on to the neck of the woman who had stood every test, caressing her and calling her his comfort, his salvation.

But the sound of his voice was changed in her ears, and the touch of his hand thrilled her not now with tenderness, but with horror. For her love was dead. It had died in the moment that she learnt that he was a traitor and a coward ; and as he buried his head on her shoulder, and poured out the passionate words for which she had longed as the desert-parched traveller for water, only the resolution that straightened her lips, and the sense of duty that shone in her cold eyes, enabled her to force down her disgust, and to bear like a lifeless statue the kisses of the husband for whom a week ago she would have died.

CHAPTER III.

THE moment when Madeline de Breteuil's sense of her duty as a wife had triumphed over her loathing for a cowardly crime had been to Louis a revelation in his knowledge of women so astonishing, so complete, that a revival of her love for him might, perhaps, have worked in his hard yet not specially strong character some sort of repentance, some sort of temporary reformation. But that was beyond her power. Pity for his abject state after her discovery of his crime lent her manner a gentleness which he mistook at first for the old fondness; but he was too sharp-sighted to be long deceived; and when he found that it was with difficulty that she schooled herself to receive his tardy advances passively, that

she would talk, laugh, work, cook, do anything to keep him for a little while at a distance, his wretched pride took fire, and he kept aloof from her in sullen disdain, which she could only make most faint-hearted efforts to break through.

There is a touch of nobility, a grace beyond the reach of commonplace humanity, in a nature which can bear the strain of a deep gratitude. When Louis de Breteuil discovered that Madeline would not break the monotony of his retirement from the world by returning his reviving passion, he soon found the burden of his debt to her extremely irksome. But he had no money, and for the moment seemed to be without the energy to make any, by fair means or foul; and Madeline, whom early training had taught to be frugal, could at least, with the proceeds of the sale of her dresses and with her small earnings, keep both him and herself from starving.

So they passed ten days of an uneasy domesticity: Madeline living in a fever of horrible imaginings, picturing the murder

about which she dared not question him, fearing that the police might be on his track ; while he, on the contrary, seemed to fall into a state of torpor, in which—as far as his wife could see—neither remorse nor apprehension had any share. She wondered how it was that, since robbery was his only possible motive, Louis seemed now to be worse off than ever ; for, whatever his moral defects might be, he was far too keen of intellect to handicap himself with the dangerous responsibilities of an unnecessary crime. She knew also that the securities which Mr. Staunton had told her, in Louis' hearing, that he had with him would be property so dangerous as to be almost valueless in the hands of a man unconnected with the Stock Exchange and ignorant of the course of affairs on it. At first De Breteuil spent all his time indoors, smoking, and reading novels in stolid indifference to everything but the quality of the meals she provided. But at the end of a week he showed signs of awakening restlessness, and went regularly out by himself for twenty minutes at a time every morning and

every night. He never brought home any newspapers and never asked to see any, but Madeline used to buy and read them with feverish haste on her way to and from the school where she now gave lessons in English for two hours every day.

Twice she read short paragraphs stating that nothing further had been heard of the missing Englishman; but the affair had evidently taken no hold upon public curiosity until the tenth day after Louis' return, when a long sensational article appeared in the *Figaro*, containing copies of telegrams sent from London to Turin, from Turin to London, and from both these places to Marseilles and Lyons, all concerning an English stockbroker who had not been heard of for thirteen days, and who was supposed to have absconded with securities to the amount of between eighteen and twenty thousand pounds. The missing man had held the high character essential to a daring and successful *coup* of this kind, and the fact that for more than a week no letters or telegrams had been received from him had aroused no suspicion until the

discovery was made that certain shares openly sold on the London Stock Exchange were the property of a client of Mr. Staunton, a gentleman residing at Turin. It was a clerk in Mr. Staunton's office who made this discovery and communicated it to the junior partner. The latter at once set inquiries on foot, and traced the sale of the shares, for the delivery of which in Turin Mr. Staunton had been responsible, to a young clerk on the Stock Exchange, who had disappeared on the morning after the fortnightly account, after cashing to the amount of several thousand pounds the cheques he had received for the sale of shares and bonds which, on examination, proved to correspond, with the exception of some foreign bonds not easily negotiable which had disappeared, with the property a Mr. Staunton had undertaken to deliver to his client at Turin. The *Figaro* gave the name of the absconding clerk, supposed to be in collusion with the defaulting Mr. Staunton, as "Memdish."

Madeline crept home that afternoon almost stupefied by the weight of guilt which seemed

to fall only on her. It was four o'clock when she reached her little sitting-room, and Louis was out. She sat for a few minutes staring stupidly at the white clouds in the sky; then, having long ago exhausted every feeling of suspicion, misery, and fear, she rose and wondered dully why her husband did not return. It was the first time he had been out at this hour, and the fear seized her that suspicion might have fallen on him, and that he might be already in the grasp of the law. She had not yet taken off her bonnet, so she ran downstairs to watch and wait for him in the street. He never told her where he went during his daily absences, so that it was chance which made her turn to the left, stop at the first corner, and look up and down the street which crossed hers, until she saw, going into a cabaret some distance off, two men, one of whom she fancied she recognised as Louis. She went quickly up the street in that direction, and, unnoticed in the crowd of foot-passengers, managed to peep into the little wine-shop. Sitting at a table close to

the door were the two men whose entrance she had watched. One of them was De Breteuil, and she saw at the first glance that his sullen listlessness was gone. He was flushed and animated, his head was erect, and he wore, for the first time since his downfall—not into crime, but into poverty—the expression of bold and cynical recklessness which had been the most striking and the most admired characteristic of his face in the days when he was king of the fashions of the boulevards.

Madeline noticed all this curiously, wondering what was the reason of the change in him ; and then she saw him put his right hand—which was the one nearest to the window—carelessly into his coat-pocket, and draw out a tight little roll of paper, with an elastic band round it. He slipped off the elastic, and, smoothing out the papers, began to count them : and she saw that they were English bank-notes. “Whose money was that ?” she asked herself, shivering and pressing closer to the window. She had been so fascinated as she watched every movement of Louis’

that her eyes had not turned for a second to his companion, whose back was towards her. She would have been able, had she left the window at that moment, to tell that he was short and broad, and shabbily dressed, but no more. However, at that moment he sat back and moved his chair a few inches, so that the light might fall upon the glass of wine he held in his hand ; and by the movement, though she could not see his face, she knew him. It was her first husband, Robert Meredith !

The moment after her recognition of him, Madeline suddenly remembered where she was, suddenly became conscious of the hurrying crowd around her, and glanced from right to left with a hot blush in her face, under the impression that she had uttered a wild shriek ; but no one was taking the least notice of her. So she looked again, shaking from head to foot, and trying to understand. One thing only in the confusion of her mind was clear to her : she was not the wife of a murderer. Her heart leapt up with passionate relief at the thought. But fast upon that followed the

consciousness of the terrible position in which the perfidy of these two wretches had placed her ; and then came the longing to be revenged upon them both, a longing fierce and hungry as the impulses of an enraged animal, as she stood panting before the window, with her hands curved like claws, her great eyes luminous with passion, and her red lips parted in straight lines over teeth that looked hideous and dangerous in their gleaming whiteness. Again she had lost herself in intent savage contemplation of the two men, when a disagreeable croaking laugh close at her ear startled her. Turning her head sharply, she saw Rosalie, the old chambermaid, whose lean leather-coloured face was wrinkled up with most flattering interest in her neighbour's affairs. She glanced alternately at Madeline and at the pair in the wine-shop, and seemed to perceive enough significance in the situation to enjoy it most heartily. Still, she was evidently curious to understand it better, and she gently detained the young English-woman by the hand as she was turning abruptly away.

“Pardon, madame,” croaked she softly, “I have not met you for a whole week, and I should so much like to know how you are getting on, if you would be so kind as to let me walk with you a little way.”

Madeline assented with no very clear intention, but with the feeling that this shrewd Frenchwoman, with her world-knowledge and her professed acquaintance with a secret in Louis’ life, might be useful or might be dangerous, but was not to be despised. She gave one last look into the wine-shop, where De Breteuil, still in high spirits, was trying to raise those of his companion to the same level by liberal draughts of wine, which the other swallowed steadily, and cursed for “d—d French rubbish” at the same time. Then the two women moved away together, and Madeline told the other that she had some pupils and hoped to have more, and that she was getting on very well indeed. But Rosalie’s information was ahead of all this.

“And monsieur has come back, I hear, so that madame is no longer dull,” she suggested simply.

“Oh no, I am not dull,” said Madeline, with irrepressible bitterness.

“And monsieur looks gayer than he used to do while at the hotel; I never saw a man more changed in a short time. I used to think how hard it was for a devoted young wife to see her husband so miserable; but to-day——”

Madeline turned sharply towards her, with such a look of agony on her face that the woman’s tongue stopped.

“We will not talk of him,” Madeline said, with difficulty; “he is—not—my husband.” And the shame of the woman, as she faltered out the terrible admission, with an effort to assume a tone of callous indifference, brought a blush into her face which burnt like a brand. “Let us talk of M. de Breteuil; he was a nobler man, he would not have treated me as this—this Louis, Monsieur Louis, is doing. I cannot bear it—I hate him, he neglects me; I—I think I am—tired of him.”

But the affectation of flippant indifference with which she said this was far too trans-

parent to deceive Rosalie, who shrugged her shoulders, but looked rather sorry for her.

“Ah, yes, M. de Breteuil, he would no doubt have treated madame differently,” said she, in a tone from which it was impossible to tell whether or no she guessed M. Louis’ identity. “He did everything *en prince*.”

“Yet you told me once that you knew something which would change people’s opinion of him? Will you tell me the secret, Rosalie?”

“I cannot, madame. I am getting old, I am nearly fifty, and I look upon that little secret as property which may some day increase my income—a retiring pension, perhaps, when my limbs grow too stiff for active service.”

“I cannot afford to buy secrets now, but I have still, as you can see, some fondness left for M. de Breteuil, and I should not like to see him hurt without——”

“Without having a hand in the matter. I understand, madame,” said Rosalie simply. And her keen commercial instinct perceiving a possible customer, she added, “I shall be

probably at the same hotel for the rest of my working days, madame, and the proprietor, M. Denis, will always be able to give you my address when I leave. I hope madame will never be so ill-advised as to—to attempt to quarrel with, or to stand against, M. de Breteuil,” she added, in a kindlier tone of warning. “You are young, handsome; you have the world before you, and with the power of your beauty you can rule men—other men. But leave M. de Breteuil alone. He has resources you do not know of, which you had better not guess. If you are dissatisfied with his treatment of you, revenge yourself, but on other men. Believe me, it would be better for you to throw yourself into the Seine, or even to be scarred with small-pox, than to tempt Fate by defying M. de Breteuil.”

“Thank you, Rosalie,” said Madeline, more impressed by the unexpected earnestness of the hard-featured woman, with the lines of avarice and suspicion so strongly marked in her face, than by the warning, which she did not intend to heed.

They were at the corner of the street. The young Englishwoman held out her hand, which the other took with more than conventional respect.

“I shall not see you again, Rosalie, for I am going to leave Paris very soon.”

“Good-bye, madame ; wherever you may be going, I wish you all prosperity and happiness.”

But even as she spoke this good wish, it was evident that the last part was only a conventional utterance, for in the face of the young Englishwoman as she thanked her and walked away there was a fixed, hard expression which told that faith and hope, the springs of happiness, were dried up in her for ever.

Madeline, left alone, reached her rooms very quickly, unlocked one of her large trunks, and began to pack it for a journey. She collected the few things she wanted to take with her besides what it already contained, and felt pleased to find that the one trunk would hold everything she wanted. Then, when she had only the top tray left to

fill, she remembered that she must pay her rent up to the end of the week, and going quickly downstairs to the little cigar-shop, she found her landlady, haggled with much spirit over the point of the next week's rent in lieu of notice which the *ex-vivandière* wanted to exact, and came upstairs again victorious, after having persuaded her to be content without it, and, moreover, to buy for a small sum her spare trunk and a few other things she could not take away with her. She was tossing on to the floor out of her writing-case a couple of notes and a dried flower out of a bouquet from Louis, when the sound of his footsteps on the stairs suddenly destroyed her busy calmness, and forced her to lean, trembling and cold with dread, upon the edge of the trunk she was filling.

She heard him enter the sitting-room, singing. He called her by name, and the sound of his voice, to which she did not reply, braced her for the meeting. When he flung open the bedroom door, she was still on her knees, quietly packing.

“Madeline!” said he, in astonishment.

“What on earth are you doing? Didn’t you hear me call you?”

“Yes,” said she quietly, “I heard you; but I am busy rearranging my trunks.”

Her tone evidently surprised him. He had been used lately to tones in which duty predominated over love, but to-day even the duty seemed to fail. He stepped forward into the room, stooped down, and looked into her face. His own was bright with the same expression of gay triumph and content which it had worn in the wine-shop.

“You are dull, my princess,” said he carelessly. “You have lived too long in these wretched little pigeon-holes; you must come back to the boulevards, and your spirits will come back with new dresses and new trinkets. No wonder you are pining: it is three months since you have worn diamonds.”

“I don’t want diamonds indeed, Louis, thank you.”

“Ah, well, the taste will come back with the means of satisfying it. You want change, you want excitement, Madeline; thank Heaven! I have at last the means of sup-

plying you with them. To-night we will dine together at Brébant's; and champagne shall bring the colour to your cheeks, and the light to your eyes, and the love to your heart too; even that has run a little dry of late for want of its proper food of presents and playthings."

Madeline looked up suddenly: it was impossible that he did not know the absurdity of his accusation. Yet he stood there playing with his purse, as light-hearted, as full of happy excitement, as a schoolboy who has just been "tipped" by his maiden aunt with a five-pound note.

"Look here," he went on, without noticing her expression or without heeding it. And he took her left hand and poured into it a dozen or so of twenty-franc pieces. He felt her hand twitch and tremble as if the coins had been red-hot, but he closed her fingers upon them and laughed into her face. "These will ease the burden of life a little, I think, Madeline."

Again she looked up at him, her face pale and damp, her great eyes glistening. "Where

did you get this money?" she asked slowly, in a voice so hoarse, so hard, so unlike her own, that he dropped her hand, and stepped back from her impatiently.

"Who has put it into your head to catechise me?" he asked coldly, "and to treat me to an unrehearsed tragedy when I offer you the pleasures you used to delight in? You should not ask questions, especially when you know that you would not be satisfied with the answers. The best thing you can do now, Madeline, is to forget as quickly as possible the disagreeable interlude of poverty and wretchedness which I would have spared you if I could, come back with me to the bright life you enjoyed so much, and rely upon me not to let such an unfortunate accident disturb your peace again."

"Unfortunate accident!" she repeated stupidly.

"Yes; and take care, you are dropping your money. You will find it slip through your fingers quite fast enough; and then, for all your contempt for it, you will come asking me for more."

“More! More of this money!” she whispered huskily, as, opening her hand, she let the gold fall on to the floor, and drew her dress away from it. Then she cleared her throat, and, attempting to go on with the work of arranging the contents of her trunk, she added quietly, with strong constraint upon herself: “You have misunderstood me, Louis; I have never cared much for your money.”

“Perhaps I have misunderstood you less than you think, Madeline,” said he, with some tenderness, as he drew a little nearer to her; and she grew suddenly still, fearing lest he should touch her again, knowing as she did that she should not be able to bear the horror of it a second time. She wanted to repress herself until he should leave her, so that she might escape quietly and without disturbance out of his sight, out of his reach. But he continued in tones that grew warmer as he proceeded: “You think, perhaps, that because I have been too much cast down of late either to cheer you or be cheered by you, I have not noticed your devotion, or been touched by it. But I have. And though

the weight of anxiety upon me has made me morose and bearish to you, I have said to myself all the time, 'When the cloud has passed, she will have her reward.' It has passed now, and my ill-humour has melted as your coldness must melt, and we will have the old times, and better times still, Madeline, and to-night we must seal the new bond with champagne and laughter."

He flung his arm round her as she cowered on the floor. But she wrenched herself shivering away from him, and rose, white and panting, to her feet. For one moment he paused, drawing himself up with a frown which frightened her; then he threw the end of his cigar out of the window, and crossed the room to her.

"Is this the congratulation I am to receive from my wife?" And he laid his hand heavily on her shoulder. "Come, be reasonable. Kiss me—say you're sorry."

Madeline was tall and broad and strong—in physical strength almost his equal; moved by an overpowering impulse of rage, terror, and disgust, she pushed him away from her

with such force that he fell staggering back against the door of the small room. "Don't touch me," she hissed as he recovered himself; "I am not your wife!"

De Breteuil steadied himself, and made no further attempt to approach her; but the horrible pallor of his dark face as he looked across at her, and the lurid light that seemed to shoot out of his black eyes, for an instant made him appear less than human. Whether he had seen her at the window of the wine-shop that afternoon she did not know, but he said quietly: "That is true, and if you are anxious to go back to the husband who got over your loss so easily, you are quite at liberty to do so. But if you are wise you will stay with me, and thank Heaven I am still willing to have you. I may be as great a villain as he, but at any rate I am a more successful one. No woman has ever had for me the charm you have had since I found you ready to stick to me through everything, in spite of circumstances which I own would have frightened off a namby-pamby woman. I will forgive you the little outburst of this

afternoon, I will love you the more for it; and if you will stay with me I will give you everything in the world you can wish for, provided only that you will have the sense to be content with your own happiness, and not pry into the means used to procure it. Will you love me on those terms?"

"No. I loathe you from the very depths of my soul. I bore with you, sheltered you in spite of my horror at your crime, because I believed you to be my husband; now my joy at finding I am not bound to you is stronger even than the sense of my own degradation. You have tricked me shamefully——"

"Nonsense!" he interrupted sharply. "You were lonely, poor, deserted by a scoundrel; I gave you—you acknowledged it—love and fortune and happiness. I respected you enough to know that you would not come with me except as my wife; therefore I had to prove to you that your husband was dead. Now that you have found out that he is alive, the best thing you can do is to forget it again."

"Unfortunately I cannot, for I have found out more than that," said she slowly.

There was a pause, during which they looked at each other steadily. Madeline had cast off all restraint, and the hatred that shone out of her gray eyes and made lines in her beautiful face was not less strong and scarcely less terrible than the fiendish malignity that from time to time flashed out from his, when her fierce words stung him.

“What have you found out?”

“I have found out that you and my dear husband have entered into a partnership which ought to be a most successful one—for a time. You are hard and daring, he is clever and easily led; he has a conscience it is easy to stifle, you have no conscience at all. Don’t scowl at me—I am not afraid of you; I know you both well, though I have only learnt the lesson this afternoon. But some day success in crime, for I suppose you will hardly stop at one robbery and one murder—yes, *murder!*—Touch me if you dare!” as he started menacingly, with scowling, livid face, staring at her in the dusk over the open trunk and the scattered unpacked trifles that strewed the disordered room.

“Some day success will make you careless, and one of you will make some little slip—my husband most likely, in a fit of drunken pleasure or drunken remorse,” said she, with biting contempt; “and that little mistake, whatever it may be, will be forgotten, and you will think yourselves safe. But wherever and whenever you make it, *I* shall find it out—I, the woman whom you have both conspired to ruin and degrade as no loving woman, as I was, ever was degraded yet. And I will work and wait and watch, wherever you are and whatever you are doing, until I have made a net about your feet which will bring you both down.”

It was not a pleasant discourse to have to listen to from the white lips of a woman whose eyes seemed to shoot fire, and whose voice grew lower and lower, until the last words were hissed into the ears of the man before her with a venom which left its mark. As she ended, De Breteuil sprang at her; but she was prepared for this, and, evading him, she ran round her trunk to the bell-rope, and pulled it twice violently. This movement

brought her to the door of the sitting-room, which she pushed open.

“What did you do that for?” asked he savagely.

“To call up Madame Despland.”

“What do you want her for?”

“I wish to declare before a witness that you are the murderer of Mr. Staunton; that you are in collusion with Robert Meredith, who disposed of the stock stolen from Mr. Staunton by you; that——”

“Are you mad?”

“No. If you wish to avoid exposure, leave me this instant; if you remain, I swear——”

She had said enough—she had looked enough. De Breteuil opened the outer door, against which he was standing, and treated her to one last scowl, which would have frightened anyone but an enraged woman. Nothing more impressive than the ordinary threat of the wife-beating costermonger occurred to him, but he said it with more than the costermonger’s significance: “I’ve not done with you yet!”

As footsteps were heard upon the stairs, he slipped out of the room.

When De Breteuil rejoined his accomplice, his spirits had fallen a good deal, and in explanation he told Meredith of the scene which had just taken place. He made light of Madeline's threats, but the other was really alarmed.

"Fancy her turning so nasty!" he said plaintively. "I don't half like it, that I don't; she always was a woman for keeping her word."

"All infernal bravado; she can prove nothing," said De Breteuil shortly.

"But won't you keep her in sight? I think it would be safer."

"Not so easy, and not worth while. Before the week is out she will have found some one able to make her forget you and me."

"And a good thing too! For she was a lot too good for either of us," said the other, with maudlin compunction. "Couldn't you—couldn't you at least find out what she's going to do, and if—if she's got money, and is—is all right?"

He insisted until De Breteuil, moved also by another motive, went round to the house that evening, crept upstairs, and tried to open the doors of the rooms Madeline had occupied. But they were locked. He went downstairs to make inquiries, and found that she had left Paris two hours before, alone.

And as he lit a fresh cigar he drew out of his pocket with his match-box a little case that looked as if it contained a pipe, and, opening it, looked affectionately at a beautiful little revolver which lay in it, and congratulated himself that Madeline's abrupt disappearance had saved him from a dangerous temptation.

"But if we should ever cross each other's path again——" he said to himself aloud. And without finishing his sentence, he blew out the match with which he had lit his cigar, and tossed it away.

END OF PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

It is the end of March, 1883—ten years and eight months since the long-forgotten disappearance of the English stockbroker, Mr. Staunton. After a mild winter, the weather has suddenly changed, the air has become keen and cold, and the north wind sweeps over the flat country round Calais and St. Omer, biting more sharply than frost, bending low the bare branches of the poplar-trees that border the roads, and nipping the cold faces and fingers of the few peasants at work in the fields.

It had been a hard winter for the poor about there, both in town and country. The lace factories of Calais and St. Pierre had not been in full work; there had been sickness in the villages, press of poverty among the un-

employed. The poor of St. Pierre, and of the district lying for some miles to the east of the town of Calais, found especial cause for complaint ; for the old curé of the former place, a man whose devotion to his parishioners during the cholera plague of 1866 had made him their idol, was ill himself ; and the little country house, where the peasantry of the barren sandy sea-coast had been always sure of a draught in time of sickness or a dinner in time of want, was half shut up, its invalid master, Mr. Beresford, having spent the winter at Nice.

Yet one more trouble, more vivid, more ghastly than the rest, had made the months of darkness and cold terrible to the unfortunate country people. Every afternoon, as the weak winter sunlight faded out of the sky and the mist rose higher and higher from the ground, the solitary worker in the fields, the man walking by himself along the high-road, would cross himself, if he was religious, and would, in any case, keep a sharp look-out if he had to pass a bit of hedge, a clump of trees, or any object which might afford a

hiding-place ; and he would turn quickly round from time to time, to glance behind him and make sure that he was not followed. For there was an enemy about, whose shape no one knew. Some said it was a wolf that the winter had brought from the far-off Ardennes, which attacked lonely travellers by night, and prowled round farmhouses and round the staring white buildings with perpendicular roofs and symmetrically shuttered windows, where retired tradesmen lived with their families. And the more stubbornly ignorant and unprogressive minds thought that it was the devil, with the traditional panoply of horns and hoofs and tail, that had been seen, always at night, lurking in the vicinity of houses which the morning light showed to have been entered and robbed. But others argued that neither wolf nor devil would find a use for the money which seemed to be the sole object of the unknown marauder ; and it was these cooler-headed reasoners who laid stress upon the fact that, with very sound human judgment, these attacks were always made upon persons whose pockets repaid the trouble of plunder.

But no one could make anything better than a wildly speculative guess as to what rogue it was who, living in their midst, and having an intimate acquaintance with their affairs, had turned his knowledge to account in this audacious and discreditable manner; and as the victims declared unanimously that it was no man that, with burning eyes and white fangs, had pulled them down, and blinded them, and growled over them, and held them fast, until they heard a faint whistle and suddenly found themselves free, no supporter of either opinion could bring convincing proof of the truth of the one he held.

In the towns these petty robberies excited little attention, until a victim of superior position to the rest, a notary, who had been attacked while returning in his *carriole* to his home in Ardres, after drawing some money from a bank in Calais, clamoured loudly at his loss, and raised an outcry against the supineness of the police in the matter. He wrote and he talked, until people were forced to read and forced to listen, and a spice of warmer interest was imparted to the affair by

his mysterious hints that he could give more than a guess at the identity of his assailant ; so that within four or five days after the attack, M. Dupont's appearance in any public place became an event of interest, and his innuendoes, which grew daily clearer, concerning young men with expensive tastes and niggardly parents, stimulated public curiosity and gave rise to much speculative controversy.

It was on the sixth day after his loss that, in the buffet of the Hôtel de la Gare in Calais, M. Dupont went so far as to give a description of his assailant which, whether from memory or unconsciously assisted by imagination, recalled vividly to the minds of the majority of his half-dozen listeners the form and features of the only son of one of the best known and most respected residents in the town.

“ He was tall and slight and well dressed, had well-cut features and grey eyes, and a slight dark moustache, and was altogether, as one would say, distinguished-looking, not like a common thief at all,” said M. Dupont slowly, in a voice just lowered to the pitch of suggestive mystery.

There was a pause. The hearers, with the feeling that they were being drawn into a conspiracy fascinating but dangerous, got gradually a little nearer to the speaker, with eyes greedy for more of this interesting scandal, yet loth to own that they recognised the portrait.

“Dark moustache, did you say?” hazarded one man at last, affecting a rather careless tone. He was a draper, and the family of the young gentleman to whom the description pointed were customers of his.

“Yes; dark moustache and not much of it,” said M. Dupont, with importance.

“Then he was young, perhaps?” suggested another.

“Quite young. About two-and-twenty, I should say.”

Another pause. Then a third listener, clearing his throat, suggested: “You—you have no idea who he was, I suppose, monsieur?”

There was a slight rustle of relief and of expectation among the rest, who felt that the crisis of their interest was approaching at last.

“Well,” said M. Dupont more slowly than ever, feeling that he must eke out the flattering excitement which his words inspired, “there are ideas which it is best to keep to one’s self, M. Perrin.”

But he had kept so very little to himself that this sudden caution roused a feeling of irritation, and a slight change of attitude in each man denoted the common feeling that they had been tricked.

“Come now, among friends you might surely use a little confidence, M. Dupont,” said a big man who had not spoken yet, laying his large hand, with sledge-hammer force, which was meant to be persuasive, on the thin bent shoulders of the little notary.

“Yes, and after all you are bound to state what you know ; and certainly you would be the last person—in fact, we should all be the last persons—to say a word that could be considered disrespectful to M. Fournier——” began the most talkative of the group. And he stopped short, suddenly conscious of what he had done as all the rest turned upon him : M. Dupont with indignation at having

his revelation forestalled, the others delighted that the subject had at last been brought within the realms of practical discussion.

After a moment's silence they all began to talk at once in low tones and with abundance of expressive gesticulation. M. Fournier was a lace-manufacturer, well off, respected, but not popular, and an opportunity of a surreptitious peck or two at his high reputation was generally appreciated.

"That is what comes of keeping a young man short of money," said M. Perrin, a florist, to whom Victor Fournier owed some fifty or sixty francs. "If his father won't let him have an allowance for his little private expenses, he must get what he wants somewhere else."

"On the contrary, I think it is the mistaken indulgence of his parents, and especially of his mother, which makes young Fournier think he is a prince who can do nothing wrong," said a gentleman, who had tried in vain to arrange a match between his plain daughter and the self-willed handsome Victor.

“Who would have expected such an escapade from the son of that thrifty old ramrod Fournier?” said the big man, who could afford an independent opinion, as he was socially beneath the manufacturer’s notice and had no business dealings with him.

“But we are not sure that it was M. Victor Fournier,” observed the only man in the group whose face showed a little intelligence. “After all, there are plenty of tall well-dressed young men with slight moustaches about. There is Dr. Lesage’s new assistant at the other end of the town, for instance; and it is not easy to see how a gentleman so well known about here as M. Victor could have carried on this game for such a long time without detection. Let me see, it was in December that these robberies first began to be talked about, and now we are in the last days of March. It would require very strong proofs to convince me that your suspicions are well founded, M. Dupont.”

“I have the proof of my own eyes,” retorted the hero of the adventure, opening them very wide, as if to demonstrate his

remarkable ocular power, and throwing off the last pretence of mystery on hearing a doubt cast upon his interesting secret, “and I can swear that it was young M. Fournier who robbed me of seventeen hundred and twenty-three francs as I lay half-stunned on my back in my *carriole*, after I had been attacked and thrown from my seat by some huge creature, whether man, wolf, or fiend, I do not pretend to say.”

“Then of course you will give information to the police, and make a statement, on the strength of which young Fournier will be arrested, and the charge gone into?” said the big man.

But the little notary’s eyes grew small again at this suggestion, and his tone became milder.

“Not so fast, monsieur; I am a father myself, and I can feel for the young man’s parents; besides which, the recognition of a man’s face in the dark would not be proof of identity in a court of law.”

“Nor anywhere else,” said the sceptic curtly. “Who has ever seen young M.

Victor in company with a mysterious familiar which has been variously described as a wolf, a man dressed in skins, and the devil? Now, if this evil genius had taken the form of a pretty grisette—or of an elegant lady of the *grand monde* with military connections, shall we say?—I might have seen something in the story.”

This reference to current gossip about young Fournier’s social successes in various ranks of life raised a laugh against Dupont, who, getting blue and angry, asked the scoffer if he doubted his veracity.

“Not at all, not at all, mon cher Dupont. I believe that you have been robbed of seventeen hundred and twenty-three francs, that you don’t quite know how, and that a bad guess in these cases is better than none to the guesser, provided he has the wit not to call it a certainty. If I were you, I would keep my suspicions to myself, but make inquiries, and you will then find out, sooner or later, whether you have ground enough to bring a distinct accusation against the person you suspect.”

It was not bad advice, and coming as it did from the mouth of a humble hanger-on at the skirts of the law—for the sceptical M. Guerlin was an attorney who earned his living by gleaning those difficult and dirty little cases which more reputable or more wealthy practitioners refused to take up—it had weight even with the irritated notary. The rest were enthusiastic in their agreement, and encouraged M. Guerlin to expose his views further.

“If,” he continued, “it is really this young Victor Fournier who, with the assistance of an accomplice, either man or beast—for I think we may spare Old Nick the blame of this—has kept the whole neighbourhood in a state of terror throughout the winter, it ought not to be difficult to track such a series of crimes home to him. He lives in our midst, his way of life is known, such frequent absences as these robberies would entail must have been noticed by somebody. Keep your eyes open, wait and see whether we shall hear of more thefts of the same kind, and don’t make a

noise before you are ready to strike your blow."

M. Guerlin's dry manner was impressive, and in the buzz of comment which followed his speech, all the rest tried clamorously to prove that what he said was just what they had been about to say. They grew so loud during this discussion, that nothing but the fact that they all spoke at once prevented the secret they were unanimous in agreeing to conceal from becoming the common property of everybody else in the room. But as it was, only one of two people sitting at a small table near to the excited speakers paid much attention to them.

The room was filled with people who had just come from Dover by boat. Most of them were English, and all of them were absorbed in swallowing, in as few minutes as possible, as much food as the sea-voyage had left them appetite for. The only two exceptions were a lady and gentleman who had excited much comment on the journey, the former by her beauty, the latter by his unmistakable devotion to her. Before sea-sickness

had damped their ardour, half a dozen British tourists had used their exploring zeal in finding out the name of the beauty who had been so fortunate as to meet with their approval, and whether she was the wife or the daughter of the erect old gentleman who accompanied her. And they discovered with a little peeping and a little prying that the lady's name was Madame de Lancry, and that M. le Général de Lancry, who travelled with her, was her husband. And then they made bets as to whether she was French or English, and would have tried to decide the point by crowding round her as she came out of her deck-cabin on arrival at Calais to listen to the words she might utter, had not a rough passage by that time taken the curl out of their amiable vivacity.

Madame de Lancry now sat with her husband at a table near the buffet, looking perfectly unruffled by the sea-journey, which had not affected the delicate tints of her complexion, nor disordered the simple travelling dress which set off to perfection her tall, massive, but still youthful figure. She

was young ; men would have said “ quite young,” and women “ still young,” but it would have been difficult to tell her exact age. There were tiny little thread-like lines in her fair skin about the mouth and eyes ; she had the manner of a woman who has been far too long used to excite general admiration to notice if it is given or even if it is withheld, while the expression of her face told plainly that she had been long enough in the world to be heartily tired of it. She was not hungry, and after trying vainly to take sufficient interest in the wing of a chicken, which her husband had carefully chosen for her, to eat it, she gave up the attempt ; and without noticing that he also was eating nothing, she was attracted at first by the noise, and afterwards by the substance of the conversation of the men at the buffet, until her whole attention was absorbed in trying to catch every word they uttered.

It was not until they had moved away, recalled to a sense of their own indiscretion by finding the eyes of the unknown lady fixed in fascinated interest upon them, that she

discovered, on glancing at her husband, that he was looking very ill. For some minutes he had sat with his elbow on the table and his head on his hand, in an attitude of carelessness which he had affected in order to conceal from his wife the indisposition which she had been too much occupied to notice.

“Did you hear what those men were saying, Gustave?” she asked, with unusual interest in her voice.

He raised his head and tried to answer her; but not even a spoilt woman could fail to see that he was very ill, and Madame de Lancry asked, “What is the matter, Gustave?” with a little natural impatience.

“Nothing, Madeline. If you will allow me, I will go outside on to the platform and smoke a cigarette before we start; I suppose the passage must have upset me a little.”

He pushed his chair back and tried to rise; but he staggered and sat down again, for the room seemed to be spinning round him. Madeline rose to go to her husband’s assistance, but his valet, who had been seated with madame’s maid in a smaller room, which

opened into the large one, was at his master's side before her. As curious eyes were being turned from all directions upon him, his wife addressed one of the waiters who had come up to see what was the matter.

"Have you a room to which this gentleman can be taken? We shall have to spend the night here."

The General was too ill to protest as he was led out of the room and upstairs to a rather sparsely decorated apartment overlooking the quay, with two big wooden bedsteads placed back to back against one of the walls. He refused to let her stay with him, saying simply: "My dear child, it is bad enough to have to put up with an old man; you shall not be troubled with an old invalid." But when after a little rest he felt better, he sent Joseph to ask if madame would kindly come to him.

Madame came at once; she was very kind, and she meant to be very sweet as she walked up to the bedside and took his hand in hers, and, looking into the fine face which was still handsome in spite of his sixty years, asked him gently if he was better.

“Yes, my dear, I am much better, thank you ; it is very good of you to care so much. I know how annoying it must be to you to have your journey interrupted in this way, and I wanted to suggest that you should go on to Rome with your maid, and I will follow in a few days. You see, you will be all right when you are once in Rome, since the Comtesse, your friend, is already there ; and I am afraid that if you wait for me you may miss the Carnival. For in my impatience to be in Rome I can see now that I got up too soon, and I don’t think I can continue the journey for several days.”

The General had been suffering from an old wound and rheumatism together, and his wife felt contrite as she listened.

“It was I who was impatient, not you, Gustave, and you came away so soon to please me. Why will you spoil me like this ? If you were to be a little less indulgent, you have no idea what a much better wife I should be. But you still treat me as if we were in our honeymoon, instead of your having been a slave to my caprices for four whole years.”

The feeling she showed brought a little colour to his face, and he raised her hand gratefully to his lips.

“I will take your advice, then, and treat you as hardly as I can. You shall stay here with me until I am well enough to travel again, and we will see whether my selfishness really is the best plan, or whether you will be bored to death.”

“Oh no, there is no fear of that,” said she quickly. “I am on the track of a most delightful mystery, which would keep me amused for a whole week, I feel sure. When we were sitting at the table downstairs, some men were talking of a robbery which occurred near here last week, and I heard them mention the name of the man they suspected. Just now I asked the chambermaid some questions, and found out that all through the winter most mysterious robberies have been going on about this part of the country; but she said that no one knew who committed them. Then I asked her who M. Victor Fournier was, without telling her that he was the man I had heard was suspected. And

she told me he is the handsomest man in Calais, a gentleman, only two or three and twenty, the son of a lace-manufacturer, who is said to be very rich and very mean. And, of course, I am dying to see this supposed Claude Duval, and I am going to call upon the consul and ask him to get me permission to go over M. Fournier's factory, on the chance of seeing his son; I shall go as early as possible to-morrow. Isn't it quite an exciting adventure?"

"Yes," said her husband, who felt too jealous of her curiosity to see the "handsomest man in Calais" to share her interest in the story.

They spent the night at the hotel, and on the following afternoon the British consul himself accompanied Madame de Lancry to M. Fournier's factory at St. Pierre, where, to her great disappointment, old M. Fournier himself showed her over the building, having come there, on receipt of a note from the consul, on purpose to do honour to the beautiful lady.

They passed from room to room, Madame

de Lancry scarcely able to conceal the fact that her strong interest in revolving sheets of twisted threads had grown singularly half-hearted and unintelligent, until they came to a corridor, at the end of which a young man was standing. Feeling sure that this must be the hero whom she was so anxious to see, Madame de Lancry looked straight into his face as she passed him. He was neither short nor tall, neither very broad nor very slight, dark-haired and dark-skinned, with a face in which there was nothing to attract particular attention, except the kind and gentle expression of his brown eyes. He glanced shyly at the handsome lady, the expression of whose face suddenly changed from curiosity to horror, as she looked at him. Only the young fellow himself noticed the look, which greatly confused and astonished him. Madame de Lancry walked on, and smiled mechanically, in answer to some remarks made to her by the two middle-aged gentlemen, but for a few minutes she did not speak. When she had recovered her self-command, she turned to M. Fournier.

“Is that one of your sons, monsieur?” she asked, glancing back to where the young man stood.

“No, madame; I have only one son, whom I hope to have an opportunity of presenting to you, if you will allow him that honour.”

“I shall be delighted, monsieur, to know your son. And that gentleman is——”

“One of my clerks, a young Englishman, introduced to the firm by my English partner, Mr. Beresford.”

“I seem to know his face. May I ask you his name?”

“Gerald Staunton.”

Out of the mists of the past a face rose before Madeline de Lancry, and a voice called to her. For one instant long-forgotten memories blinded, stunned her; the next she was thanking M. Fournier for his courtesy, and inventing excuses to hurry away from the building.

CHAPTER II.

MADÉLINE DE LANCERY returned quickly to the Hôtel de la Gare, crept softly past the door of her husband's room, fearing lest he should call to her ; and, shutting herself in her own apartment, threw herself upon the bed, overwhelmed by a sudden rush into the stagnant calm of her present prosperous existence of memories of the old tempestuous life of emotions and passions, keen pleasures and deep griefs. Gerald Staunton ! The young clerk's face, so like that of his father whom Louis de Breteuil had murdered, recalled the old time in Paris so vividly that for an hour or more, during which she lived with the old zest and burned with the old fires, it did not occur to her to wonder and to moralise about the chance which had brought across her path

the son of the man who had met with a violent death while on the way, as he thought, to answer her appeal to him for help.

Madeline had hardened since then; she was not a monster of selfishness, but her own small discomforts, and the barren monotony of her tiresome easy life with her kind but most dull husband, occupied so much of her thoughts that she really had very little time for the consideration of other people and their troubles. For six years after the discovery of De Breteuil's crime and of his perfidy towards herself she had earned her own living in all sorts of ways, honestly always, although since Louis' betrayal her virtue was no longer the fair fruit of modesty, but of cynical scorn. It was typical of the lowering of her moral tone which bitter experience had brought about that she then, in a fit of weariness of work, married General de Lancry, without telling him that she had been married before, and did not know whether her husband was alive or dead, and without feeling much concern on that point herself. However, to do her justice, she considered herself per-

manently bound to the chivalrous and devoted gentleman whom she soon found unspeakably tedious, and dragged him dutifully about with her, accepting his fondness and spending his money with indifference which trembled on the borders of disgust.

Now, therefore, as she lay on her bed recalling the time when pleasure could please and conscience sting, she thought only of comparing it with the joyless, painless days she passed now, and did not even remember her words to Mr. Staunton: "I should like some day to meet your son, and to do him some service, for the sake of your kindness to me."

When at last she was obliged to rise and go to see her husband, who had grown anxious at her long absence, she had forgotten all about the object of her visit to the factory, and on the General's asking her rather jealously what she thought of "the handsomest man in Calais," she replied quite calmly that she had not seen him.

"Then I am afraid you must have been bored, my dearest," said her husband. "Yet

you stayed there a long time, and there is something in your face, a brightness, a liveliness, which I should like to see there more often. You must have seen something to interest you."

"Yes, I did," said she simply; but she offered no further information, and his pardonable curiosity remained unsatisfied.

On the following afternoon, before the excitement consequent on her visit to the factory had quite faded away, a card was brought to her, bearing the name of M. Victor Fournier, with a message to the effect that he had come on the part of his father, and a request that Madame de Lancry would see him for a few minutes. Madeline directed that he should be shown into her sitting-room, and she then added a few artistic touches to her complexion, and a neckerchief of filmy cream lace to the rather dowdy toilette which had been good enough for her husband. She said to herself, as she looked mockingly in the glass which showed her at that moment a face and figure which would have made an ideal model for a wicked Roman empress, that this provincial

Don Juan would certainly not prove worthy of these infinite pains to please. "He will have a round rosy face and very bright beady black eyes, and a clumsy figure ; he will wear a vivid satin tie with broad stripes or big spots, and his manner will be half-impertinent, half-bashful, and wholly insufferable." In making this disdainful estimate she forgot that his father, with his simple courtesy and unaffected manners, was a gentleman ; but, in leaving beneath her the lower middle class in which she was born, Madeline had acquired an appreciation of the advantages of good birth loftier than if she had been a king's daughter. Still, it was with a feeling of interest and curiosity refreshing in the blank dreariness of uncongenial married life that she entered the sitting-room, and without delay won all the heart the susceptible young Frenchman had to give.

"I am very glad to meet you, M. Fournier," said she, advancing into the room with her hand held out, as she saw at the first glance that her guesses about him had been, as might have been expected, wholly wrong.

“Your father promised me this pleasure yesterday, but I was obliged to hurry away to my husband, who is ill, before you arrived.”

“It is very good of you, madame, to receive me at such a time, when you must be anxious and preoccupied. My father begs that you will accept a souvenir of the honour you have done us in visiting the factory; I have brought it myself; it is very small, and very unworthy of your acceptance, but you will give us great pleasure if you will accept it, all the same.”

If Victor had been at all like the fancy portrait she had drawn of him, his presentation of a parcel which she opened and found to contain some very beautiful machine-made lace would have made him seem ridiculous. But as in dress and manner he scarcely differed in any respect from the young men whom Fortune had favoured with the Paris stamp, she accepted the gift with more than her usual graciousness to strangers, told him his visit was a most merciful act towards a lonely traveller, and asked him to tell her what she ought to do and what she ought to

see in Calais, in order to make the time of her unavoidable stay there hang less heavily upon her hands. So they sat down, and he gave her a lively description of the pleasure she might extract, if she went provided with a smelling-bottle and plenty of eau-de-cologne, from a contemplation of the picturesque beauties of the old walls and the moat ; and he told her that the chief pleasure of the town was scandal, that the old people thought it a very wicked place and the young ones a very dull one, and that its most remarkable peculiarity was the fact that it should be used as a habitation for the living instead of a tomb for the dead.

Madeline listened and laughed, and wondered if this were really only a light-hearted lively young fellow, happy in the possession of good prospects, a ready tongue, and a handsome face, or—Claude Duval. She would not have entertained the latter idea, if a chance similarity in the tall slim figure and in the type of his clear-cut thin features to Louis de Breteuil had not recalled to her that most frivolous-mannered of scoundrels. Victor was

some seven years younger than De Breteuil had been when she knew him, and was not, Madeline thought, so handsome as he ; still, the resemblance, slight as it was, gave the young fellow additional interest in her eyes, and she let him talk for some time before touching upon either of the subjects which just now occupied most of her thoughts.

At last, however, she broke ground by saying, “ I should have liked to make some excursions about the neighbourhood, but I have been alarmed by dreadful tales of demons and wolves and robbers, who go about at night attacking people. Or are they only fables ? ”

“ Not quite that, madame, but you need not be afraid. I have never heard of one of these attacks being made by day, and only one of a person being attacked while driving. If you will allow me to ride beside your carriage, I will answer for it that no harm shall happen either to your person or your purse. ”

To judge by his manner, anyone would have pronounced him innocent as the day,

and Madeline perceived that, if he really was the robber, he was far too clever to be convicted by his own mouth. She therefore thanked him for his offer, and turned the conversation to another matter. In spite of all her efforts she could not frame her next question without a tremor of voice and a twitching of lip, both, however, too slight to attract notice.

“When I was at the factory yesterday, I saw there a young Englishman of the name of Staunton ; do you know if he is any relation to the man of that name, a stockbroker or something of that sort I think he was, who was murdered near Lyons a few years ago ? The affair caused some stir, I believe, at the time.”

“Murdered !” exclaimed Victor, in evident astonishment. “Oh no, madame. Ah ! I suppose Gerald himself told you that ?”

“No,” answered Madeline quietly ; then, in a voice which she found it hard to keep indifferent, “I have not spoken to him—I saw him for the first time yesterday. The name seemed to recall some story, that was all.”

“There is a story about it,” said Victor, lowering his voice instinctively. “And a very mysterious one. But the strangest thing about it is that you say just what Gerald says—that his father was murdered.”

“Well, and what is the true story?” asked Madeline, unfolding the lace M. Fournier had sent her, and gathering it up into folds to employ her trembling hands.

“He absconded with some thousands of pounds’ worth of securities belonging to his clients, and nobody has ever been able to trace either him or his accomplice.”

The lace fell from her fingers to the floor, but she did not pick it up, and by an imperative gesture she stopped him as he was about to do so.

“Who was that?” she asked, in a sharp voice.

“Another English stockbroker, a younger man, whose name, I think, was Meredith. Poor Gerald insists upon believing that this man murdered his father and stole the securities; but it has been proved that on the very day that Mr. Staunton was last seen,

near Lyons, Meredith was in London, where he remained until he had disposed of the securities, which must have been sent to him by Staunton himself."

"Or by some one who had stolen them from Mr. Staunton," said Madeline, with such vehemence that Victor was startled. He had not expected such strength of passionate sympathy in the languid listless lady of a few minutes ago. "Who was he last seen with, in Paris for instance?" she added hotly.

"I—I don't know, I don't think any one knows, madame; but he was a cautious man, it is said, and one not at all likely to get into questionable company."

Madeline checked her rising excitement, and only asked simply: "On what grounds does his son believe him innocent?"

"On none—at least, none worth mentioning. He says his father was a good man—as unconvicted thieves always are—and that he would rather have starved than have deserted his son."

"And has the lad tried to find out anything about his father's disappearance?"

“Oh yes. As soon as he was eighteen—that is six years ago now—he came over to France, determined to clear his father’s name, as he felt sure he could do. He got as far as Paris, and then, in a most extraordinary manner, just as he thought he had got a clue, he was robbed of all the money he had saved up; and he was at his wit’s end to know what to do, for he was ashamed to write home to his friends for fear they should disbelieve him and say he was no better than his father. Then Mr. Beresford, my father’s English partner, met him, found out what was the matter, felt sorry for him, and offered him a berth which the poor fellow was glad enough to accept, for he had thrown up his chances in order to come over on this wild hunt for evidence which, of course, he could not find.”

“Why not? He should have gone to Lyons; have visited the hotel where Mr. Staunton stayed; have traced him step by step to the very last place where he was seen; have asked, hunted, found out whether he had received any letters——”

She stopped. Her excitement had grown into agony as she uttered the last words. Astonished, shocked by the intensity of the interest she showed in a stranger's story, Victor did not at once speak, but sat watching the transformation which passion had effected in her beautiful features, admiring her sensibility, envying the object of it.

"He would have done so, madame," said he at last, "but, as I tell you, he was robbed of the money he had saved up to carry out the search; and if it had not been for the lucky chance of his meeting with Mr. Beresford——"

"Why did not this Mr. Beresford give him or lend him the money to go on to Lyons? That would have been the best way of befriending him," said Madeline, who no longer made any pretence of hiding the strong interest she felt in the story of Gerald Staunton's troubles.

"He would have done so, I am sure, if he had thought that was best, madame. He is a most kind-hearted man, and is so fond of Gerald that he has taken him to live with him."

“He may be kind, but he is not wise. What sort of a man is he?”

“He is the most marvellous old fossil in the country. To see him sitting in the corner by the stove, silent, almost motionless, with his back to the light, which hurts his eyes, he looks like nothing but a heap of old clothes. But though he never reads and hardly ever talks, he manages to find out or guess all that is going on, not only around him, but in the world; and he has such wonderful judgment that people go to him for advice as they would to a wizard. My father, who thinks he can learn more from hearing Mr. Beresford ask for the butter than in listening to a discourse from a member of the Academy, says the secret of this wonderful faculty lies in the way Mr. Beresford, isolated from the world, turns over a thing in his mind entirely without prejudice or personal feeling. For he is partly paralysed down the right side, and can only move about with difficulty. But though his speech is not quite clear, his mind is; and Gerald Staunton forms the link between him and the outer world.”

“And what does he think about the story of young Staunton’s father?”

“He believes there may be more in what Gerald says than anybody thinks; for he has a great belief in instinct, and he is never tired of hearing Gerald relate what he calls his ‘reasons’ for feeling sure his father was innocent. He is coming back from Nice, where he has been spending the winter, in a few days; and on the way home he is going to make some inquiries at Lyons; and if he hears anything which seems to him to promise a clue, he will send Gerald there to follow it out himself.”

“When will he come back, do you say? I should like to know this Mr. Beresford. All that you have told me about him and his *protégé* is very strange and interesting.”

“We have not yet heard the day of his coming; but I will let you know as soon as we do. My father is very anxious for his arrival; for I must tell you that we owe the position we hold at the very head of the lace-making firms to Beresford’s faculty for predicting, at the beginning of each season, what

sort of lace will be most in request during the course of it."

"How does he do that?"

"By buying every book and every paper bearing on the fashions, and having them read aloud to him; and by communications which he has established with the leading Paris *modistes*, by means of one or two of his travellers, who have a sort of spy's genius for picking up just the information they want."

"I must see him; I would stay in Calais a week on purpose. Remember your promise. Monsieur Victor, to let me know when he arrives. I thought I should die of dulness in this place, and already I have heard more interesting things than I have done for the past year. You will come and see me again? I hope, in a day or two, that my husband will be better, and that you will then do us the pleasure of dining with us; but don't harden your heart until then against a forlorn traveller. Come and tell me more about the wizard. Perhaps I may be able to coax him into letting me know the summer fashions a whole month before anybody else: then I shall believe in him."

She gave him her hand again, as she bade him good-bye, with an imperial graciousness which intoxicated Victor, who left her presence in an ecstasy of admiration of this lovely woman, whose manners, conveying exactly whatever impression she intended, seemed to him perfect after the less artistic affectations of the women among whom his daily lot was cast. Returning to the factory, where he found Gerald Staunton busy with correspondence, he snatched pen and letters away, and, throwing himself on to a chair in front of the young Englishman, began to discourse upon the latter's wonderful luck.

"What do you mean? What are you driving at?" said Gerald rather irritably. He was not ill-tempered, but he wanted to finish his day's work and get away.

"Why, you are a hero, my boy, a hero. Madame de Lancry, the loveliest woman that ever made little women look insignificant and big ones clumsy, has condescended to be interested about you, to want to know who you are, and——"

"That'll do," said Gerald shortly. He

was sensitive about any interest he might excite, knowing well that it would be roused, not about himself, but about his unhappy story. For he was a modest fellow enough, and the one capacity he had shown, up to his present age of four-and-twenty, of getting through whatever work was given him to do with plodding steadiness, and no better or worse than other people, was not brilliant enough to have exposed him to the dangers of extravagant praise.

“Ungrateful stolid Englishman that you are! Why, I would give all my best engagements for next month to inspire in her one-tenth of the warmth she expressed about you. She is a queen, an empress, a goddess.”

Gerald had recovered his pen and his letter, and was scratching steadily away again, as if all the beauties that ever dazzled Pagan or Christian were less interesting in his eyes than a bill of lading.

“Did you *see* her?” asked Victor, laying his hand over the letter.

“Yes—saw her yesterday.”

“And you don’t worship her?”

“No.”

“You are jealous because she let me stay so long this afternoon.”

“What !” said Gerald, raising his eyes to the other’s face with a straightforward look of contempt. “Jealous because a woman, ten years older than you or I, is good enough to amuse herself with you, and to let you fill up her spare time when she is tired of being with her old husband ! Well, you can think so if you like. But just ask yourself what I should find to say to her or she to me, and whether I should like to be shut up in a hot scented room trying to be amusing—which I never was yet—while I, and she too, for that matter, wished I were walking over the sand-hills of ‘Les Bouleaux,’ three miles away. And if you can worship a woman like that, all powder and smiling manners that one can’t trust, I think it’s a bad look-out for Miss Beresford.”

“I can worship them both and half a dozen more at the same time, as far as that goes,” said Victor airily. “You Englishmen, and especially an Englishman like you,

Gerald, consider love as a duty of the good citizen, and as soon as you are twenty-five you begin to look about for a lady-love, just as you would for a pair of boots—only you are satisfied more easily. And occasionally you find you have made a mistake—her eyes are not the right colour, or she can't knit—and you change her for another, just as you would a pair of boots. And you go to see her every Sunday for five years, and then you marry her; and you have had your romance and are satisfied. And you might as well be a sheep for all you know of love."

"That's all nonsense," said Gerald angrily, "and at any rate we choose our own boots, and don't submit to have them chosen for us by our papas and mammas, like little children. And if we don't want so many pairs as you Frenchmen, perhaps we like them a better quality."

As in all their little skirmishes, Gerald's heavier and more earnest manner made him seem rude, while Victor's most irritating speeches were uttered with a buoyant good-humour which made them less uncivil but

more telling. And then, too, he would not be annoyed, which gave him an enormous advantage over his antagonist.

“Well, you cannot sneer at me on that point now ; since the goddess I adore and the girl I am to marry are both fellow country-women of yours.”

“Madame de Lancry has married a Frenchman and is half a Frenchwoman herself by this time. And I can tell you that Miss Beresford must be a very poor specimen of an English girl to allow herself to be dragged over here to be married to a man she has never seen. No English father but Mr. Beresford, who is unlike anybody else and has his own way with everyone, would have dared to suggest such a thing to his daughter.”

“Don’t let us talk about her. I dream of the long teeth and huge feet she will be sure to have. If Beresford were not my father’s religion, I think he would be a little less ready to give me for a wife a girl whom her own father has not seen for years, and whose mother had knocked about the world with her for so long without her husband. Does Mr.

Beresford ever mention what was the cause of his separation from his wife ?”

“No ; I never heard about her till last year the news came to ‘Les Bouleaux’ that she was dead, and he got me to send off a telegram to his daughter to ask what she proposed to do. If I were you, I wouldn’t look at a girl who has been brought up like that without knowing more about her.”

“Well, of course it is still open to me to decline to ratify the bargain, but that is a resource to be used only if Miss Beresford should prove to be forty and humpbacked. Old Beresford is rich and economical. If marriage fills one’s purse and discharges one’s filial obligations, it is unreasonable to expect more from it. Now come down to the quay with me,” as Gerald fastened up his last letter. “It has left off raining ; I want to feel the sea-wind in my face for ten minutes.”

“You want to be near the Hôtel de la Gare,” said Gerald bluntly.

However, he put on his hat and overcoat, and the two walked down to the pier together.

CHAPTER III.

It was a stormy afternoon ; the sun struggled out now and then from behind dark banks of cloud, but shone, for the most part, with a weak and watery light through a slanting veil of rain. The sea was a dark gray-green, with foaming white lines and peaks ; and the big waves that rolled up to the harbour mouth, and broke against the pier-head with a roar as they dashed up and a ripple as they fell back, tossed a blinding spray high into the air and made the planks of the pier dark and slippery.

The mail steamer from Dover was in sight, and Victor and Gerald waited to see it come in, with a malicious anticipation of amusement at the spectacle of a bevy of their fellow-creatures staggering, limp, green-faced,

and miserable, up the gangway and along the wet planks of the pier towards the station. So they joined the small group of fellow-enthusiasts whom no stress of weather could keep from their favourite excitement of passenger-baiting ; as the victims landed Victor enjoyed and moralised, while the softer-hearted Gerald was inclined to feel sorry, especially for one pale little girl, shivering in her ulster, who seemed to be alone, and who, with her arms laden with rug, umbrella, and travelling-bag, was mercilessly sandwiched and shunted and elbowed out of everybody's way, and who, when at last she had been driven up the gangway at the point of a man's gun-case, slipped on the wet planks of the pier, and was only saved from falling by Gerald himself, who sprang forward just in time, and then picked up the rug which had dropped from her hands. The pale little lady seemed at first inclined to resent his timely aid, and withdrawing her arm very quickly from the hand with which he had saved her, she said, "*Merci, monsieur !*" in the haughtiest manner : but a second glance

at him as he humbly restored her rug seemed to convince her that he was not the bold bad man that every unIntroduced stranger is, according to the creed of a carefully brought-up girl, bound to be ; and her little pale cheeks flushed as she ventured upon a most diffident and well-controlled smile into his kind face, and then struggled bravely on again.

“How those English girls clothe themselves!” remarked Victor, glancing in contemptuous amusement at the little ulstered figure.

“And how much better it looks to be dressed in a flapping cloak of impossible tartan, with a hat down over the nose in front and turned up to show a skinny dark neck behind, with a blue gauze veil fastened down like a skin over the face—like half of the Frenchwomen!” said Gerald, with unnecessary excitement.

Victor showed no inclination to quarrel in defence of his countrywomen, so the two young men strolled off the pier in the wake of the travellers, and walked along the

quay at the suggestion of the enamoured one, under the windows of the Hôtel de la Gare.

From behind the muslin blinds of her room, Madame de Lancry saw them, and watched, not the man at whose suggestion they had come that way, but the Englishman, the sight of whom recalled each moment more clearly the man who had come to his death in his attempt to help her in her supposed need. Conscience was waking in the woman, and, combined with a craving for strong excitement of some sort to give zest to her insipid life, it became a stimulus to prompt action on behalf of the son of the man who had befriended her. What should she do? By a word she could put Gerald Staunton on the track of his father's murderer, by simply giving the lad the address of the magnificent house in the Avenue Friedland where Louis de Breteuil passed every winter season, each year surpassing the preceding one in the splendour of his entertainments and the extravagant luxury of his mode of life. But she was experienced enough to be

a fair judge of a character from a face, and she guessed that either in direct attack, or in the tortuous paths of the private detective, such weapons as the Englishman of twenty-four would use would prove blunt and pointless against a ripe and unprincipled strategist like Louis.

There was only one person who had both the power and the will to meet and cope with Louis; and that was the woman who had learnt the bitterest secrets of life from him. Madeline felt a new life, fed with strong impulses of generosity, of daring, and of revenge, glow in her veins as she took the resolution to avenge herself and lift the cloud from Gerald Staunton's life at the same time.

And when she read the newspapers to her husband that evening, with even more than her usual reckless disregard of those trifling rules of elocution and punctuation necessary to make the news of the day intelligible, the uncomplaining General little guessed that his wife was in the throes of an awakened sense of duty.

The storm-clouds had broken, and the sun was setting in an almost clear sky, when Victor Fournier and Gerald Staunton left the quay and the fascinating neighbourhood of the Hôtel de la Gare, and, passing again across the old drawbridge and through the dark, narrow streets of Calais, reached the market-place, where their ways diverged. Victor had to cross the Place to the left to reach his father's house, while the gig which took Gerald daily to and from the town was waiting for him at the factory.

“Come home and dine with us to-night,” said Victor, as they stopped at the corner of the Place. “You know my mother will be delighted to see you; and as for Louise, she declares you are the most charming fellow in Calais, and is always commiserating you for the lonely life you lead at ‘Les Bouleaux.’”

“Thanks awfully, but I can't come; for, now all the country people's heads are turned by fright about the robberies, if I were late I should find the house locked up, and be taken for a thief when I got back.”

“Mon Dieu! what a life you must have led there this winter all by yourself!”

“It has been rather dull. When I get too tired of reading to read any more, I generally go into the kitchen and sit with the servants. I say I do it to prevent their feeling nervous; but it isn’t all unselfish kindness when the wind begins to blow and those beastly upstairs shutters to bang.”

“Why do you put up with it? Old Beresford’s a pig to expect it of you. Why don’t you tell him that, if he expects you to put up with his dull presence and still duller absence, he must make you a decent allowance, and let you find yourself a wife?”

Victor had slipped his arm within that of his companion, and was strolling with him across the market-place in the direction of his own home. Gerald laughed at his last suggestion.

“Oh yes, I can imagine myself taking the high hand with Mr. Beresford, asking for an allowance, as if I were indispensable to him, instead of being only a poor clerk whom he engaged out of compassion, with only just

brains enough to add up a column of figures and write a business letter after clear instructions. I should like to see myself asking Mr. Beresford to be good enough to oblige me with money to support a wife! Besides, I don't want one."

"Oh yes, you do; you're just cut out to make a good husband for a nice girl," said Victor, in a tone which flesh and blood—of four-and-twenty—could not stand.

"I suppose you mean I'm too dull and stupid to enjoy life," Gerald retorted, with a not very successful attempt to look wild and wicked.

"Not at all, my dear boy. We all know what brilliant success you have with the women, and how Monnier's daughter——"

"Shut up!" said Gerald shortly.

Babette, the sixteen-year-old daughter of Monnier, Mr. Beresford's head gamekeeper, was a rustic coquette whom the tongues of her less handsome female acquaintances did not spare.

"Now don't turn savage, dear boy," continued Victor easily. "I'm not chaffing,

upon my honour, when I tell you to beware of that girl. For if ever there was a pretty little vampire, born with a natural taste for devouring her species, it is she. She would make a fool of any man, young as she is."

"With the exception, of course, of the all-conquering M. Victor Fournier."

"I! I wouldn't go near the little she-devil for all—well, all the plunder Monnier himself has collected since he has been in old Beresford's service."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, that thieving runs in the family. Old Monnier—at least, he isn't very old, but, anyhow, I mean Babette's father—was as poor as a church mouse when he first became Beresford's gamekeeper, as I happen to know. And now—as I also happen to know—after being gamekeeper five years, he has a couple of cottages and a wine-shop of his own. He has feathered his nest, and his daughter means to feather hers—if she can. But if you take my advice, you won't help her."

"Very good advice, no doubt. But it would sound a little more disinterested if I

had not happened to pass by Monnier's cottage yesterday week, and to see you and Babette standing by the fire in very amicable converse indeed."

Victor stopped, and making Gerald stop too, stared down into his face for some seconds without speaking. Then he asked simply, "Are you serious?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, then, you have made some strange mistake. I haven't been in the direction of 'Les Bouleaux' for more than a month. You don't believe me?"

"How can I, when I saw you with my own eyes?"

"On what day do you say it was you saw me, and at what time?"

"It was on Wednesday, the 21st; I remember the date because it was the night on which Dupont was robbed. I got back home a little earlier than usual, because your father came in and told me I might be off if I liked, as there was nothing left for me to do in the office, and he wanted me to write to Mr. Beresford. It was soon after five when

I got to the gate at the end of the poplar avenue; and I got down, tied up the horse, and went on to Monnier's to see if he had finished cleaning my gun," continued Gerald, flushing, "and as the door was fastened I just looked in at the window, and saw you and Babette standing together by the fireplace."

"Was the fire bright?"

"No-o, not very, I think; but it was bright enough to see you by."

"If it had been as bright as the infernal regions on a fête-night, you could not have done that," said Victor composedly, "for I was not there."

"Then M. Victor Fournier's ghost was."

"I was playing *écarté* with Paul Gilbert in his brother's rooms from five o'clock that day until half-past six, when I went to dine with them at Dessin's. If it was my ghost you saw, it did you good service in warning you off such dangerous ground; but I confess I think it more probable that in the half-light you mistook some other fool for your faithful counsellor."

He saw plainly by the stubborn way in which Gerald's mouth was closed that the latter did not believe him, but he seemed not to think the matter of sufficient consequence to press the point, and continued, in a tone which he tried to make less patronizing :

"You need not think I look down upon you for being such a good fellow as you are, Gerald. On the contrary, I give you my word that if only old Beresford would do his duty, and behave handsomely to you—which is the least he can do after all the fuss he has made about your history—forgive me, I don't mean to pain you—and the use he makes of you as a kind of postman, there is no man whom I would rather see the husband of my own sister than you, Gerald."

"Thank you," said the other, with no appearance of being overwhelmed with joy at the suggestion.

"Now don't speak like that," said Victor genially. "Don't you see that I could not pay you a greater compliment than by giving you this hint? A man's sister is all that he holds most sacred in womanhood, and it is,

besides, an open secret in the family that Louise takes your story to heart more as if you were a hero out of a book than a living man. It is a fact, I assure you."

"It is very good of her," said Gerald rather stiffly, though it was impossible for him to treat such a statement of a lady's kindness discourteously.

"Now do come and dine with us; it is only at the end of the street," said Victor persuasively, as his companion stopped.

"No, thank you, I am late as it is. Give my kind regards to Madame and Mdlle. Fournier."

And wrenching his arm rather roughly out of that of his friend, Gerald escaped and made his way as fast as he could to where the gig was waiting for him. The old horse which drew this respectable-looking, but by no means fashionably built, vehicle was the fattest in the department; and although Gerald had taken a mean advantage of Mr. Beresford's absence to urge the brute daily to a sharper trot than its merciful master would have allowed, still the disrespectful questions

which the *gamins* would address to him from a safe distance on the roadside as to whether he was going to market instead of his grandmother, and whether his horse was to run for the Grand Prix, were among the most distasteful experiences of his daily life.

He now eyed the too well-rounded proportions of the obnoxious animal with more dissatisfaction than usual, being in an ill-humour, mounted into the gig, and drove off with a very strong feeling that the world was not using him well. It was a dull drive to "Les Bouleaux," along a flat road through a bare landscape; and the east wind blew straight into his face the whole way. A consideration of his position in life, which Victor's well-meant but rather tactless discourse had forced upon him, was dispiriting almost beyond endurance. He had no friends who cared much about him; for Mr. Beresford, with all his kindness, seemed to live in a philosophical abstraction which put him outside the influence of mutual human sympathies, and made him regard Gerald rather as the subject of an interesting psychological

experiment than as a solitary and steadily working young man, who took life as it came, and tried very hard to be cheerful over it. He had no prospects, for his labour was not particularly valuable, and he had arrived, either by instinct or reflection, at the conclusion that Mr. Beresford, taking nothing but a philosopher's interest in him and his "case," had no intention of raising him above his present position of poorly-paid clerk at the factory, caretaker at "Les Bouleaux," and postman between those two places.

As for marrying Louise Fournier, as her brother had suggested, that was quite out of the question, and Gerald did not regret it. Being unused now to ladies' society, he was shy and constrained in the presence of Madame Fournier and her daughter, and Louise's spontaneous gaiety had a stupefying effect upon him. She was a bright round-faced girl of seventeen, whom he had never once seen with her cheeks undimpled by a smile. She had rosy lips and sparkling eyes and the beauty of extreme youth, and was a

very good-humoured and pleasant creature, with a tendency to romance in her temperament which did not find expression in a pensive brow and love-worn cheek, but in a very simple and sincere interest in unlucky Gerald Staunton, and a wish, which she had openly confided to her mother and brother, that he might be discovered to be a long-lost heir to something or other, and might then ask her to console him for his past misfortunes. But this seemed unlikely, and in the meantime Gerald's thoughts were more occupied with the perfidious Babette, with whom he had been carrying on an innocent but interesting flirtation, when his unlucky peep through the window of her father's cottage eight days ago had shown him the rustic beauty with an arm round her waist which he felt still convinced was Victor's, and he had experienced a sudden sharp pang which he could not mistake for any other feeling than jealousy. Since then he had avoided Monnier's cottage, and nothing would have induced him to turn his steps in that direction to-day if he had not remembered,

just as his horse stopped of his own accord at the gate of the long poplar avenue leading up to "Les Bouleaux," that the gamekeeper had not yet returned his gun; and though he was not in present need of it, still it would no doubt be safer in his own room than lying about in Monnier's cottage. The white gate of the avenue stood open, as was frequently the case, there being no lodge to guard the way of entrance to the unpretending little country house which the peasants nevertheless called the "château;" but as the horse had stopped as if accustomed to a halt here, Gerald after a few moments' debate with himself jumped down, fastened the reins to one of the gate-posts, and sauntered down the road in an unconcerned manner towards the gamekeeper's cottage, which stood in a garden still bare, but which already showed signs of the care that would make it pretty and productive by-and-by. He whistled to himself as he walked up the garden-path, and tapped at the door without peeping in at the window this time. It was opened at once by Babette herself, whom he greeted in an off-

hand manner, and, after one supercilious glance, asked whether her father was at home, while his eyes wandered all round the cottage and all over the landscape, and the restlessness of his manner betrayed at once to the untutored coquette that he had come to see her and her alone, though he would not have had it known for worlds:

CHAPTER IV.

GERALD STAUNTON'S assumption of easy indifference to Babette, as she opened the cottage door to him, was no match for the girl's more genuine coolness.

"Come in, monsieur," said she very carelessly : and Gerald, not having expected her to take this tone with him, was compelled to look at her more attentively to try to make out the reason of the change.

For even when capricious Babette was on with the new love, she did not, as a rule, show any desire to be off with the old, being a young lady who felt herself quite capable of driving a team of admirers with amusement to them and profit to herself. It would have required a very shrewd judge of character to gauge the depth of the girl's lover-leading

capacity on a first introduction to her. A great shy blue-eyed creature, with thick loose lips, dazzling teeth, and fair complexion browned and reddened by the sun, her face set off by a narrow frame of fair hair brushed back under her clean white cap, she had a habit of blushing which a stranger would have mistaken for a sign of modesty, and a perfectly natural way of casting down her blue eyes on receipt of a kiss or a compliment, which would have won a poet's heart, and inspired him with the new idea of setting forth in verse the superiority of the unsophisticated village lass over the brazen tennis-playing girls of his own rank of life. She wore a plain short gown of coarse blue stuff, and an apron of lighter blue cotton, and she clanked about the roughly tiled floor in a huge pair of wooden shoes, the sound of which Gerald loved; in her large red hands she held a half-finished grey stocking on wooden knitting-pins, with one of which she indolently pointed to a chair.

“Sit down, monsieur; my father will be in immediately,” said she, without so much as a look at the young gentleman, and in a tone so

much haughtier and more indifferent than the one he had assumed, that Gerald instantly dropped into his usual manner, vanquished on the ground he had chosen.

“How’s the cow, Babette?” he asked simply.

“She’s better; I gave her a bran-mash the night before last,” answered the girl, still with dignity.

“And the chicken; did you find the one that strayed away?”

“Yes, monsieur; it had got into the dry ditch behind the potatoes,” she answered rather impatiently.

A pause. He could not think of anything else to ask about for a few moments; then he asked, with sudden fire, “Has old Elise given you the fifteen sous she owed you for the turnips?”

“Oh yes,” said Babette, twisting one shoulder up to her ear petulantly. “It is all settled. All those common things don’t interest me,” she added, tossing her head back as she leant, with crossed feet, against the wall by the wide hearth.

Gerald stared at her in astonishment. Hitherto thrift and coquetry had gone hand in hand in the girl's nature, and the prospects of the beetroot crop had excited her as much as the promise of a bead necklace. He was utterly grieved by this new phase, having always admired and encouraged the simple frankness with which she used to tell him, with her mouth full of the apples and gingerbread of his providing, which she used to devour in unromantic quantities, all the details and petty economies of the sordid cottage-life. This must be one of the bad results of Victor's influence, he thought, angrily and sorrowfully. Why couldn't the fellow amuse himself in the town, without coming out here to spoil the sweet rustic innocence of pretty Babette? For Gerald believed the girl to be as honest-hearted as himself; and he now debated what terms he had better use to put the trusting creature on her guard.

"You used not to talk like that, Babette," he began at last cautiously. "Last time I was here, when you showed me that big ham you were so proud of, and we looked over the

sunflower-seeds, and I made you those new clothes-pegs, you didn't talk of 'common things' then."

Babette shrugged her shoulders, tossed her head again, and unconsciously thrust into greater prominence her great wooden-shod feet as she slid into a lounging attitude of haughty indolence, still working away busily at her stocking, however.

"All that was childish. One can't be always a child. Don't talk to me about clothes-pegs, I hate such things."

"Who has taught you to hate them?"

"Nobody," answered the girl hastily and rather peevishly. "You think I am just a common girl and can only talk about cows and pigs. It isn't true; I like to talk about other things."

"What things do you like to talk about now, Babette?"

"Oh, about Paris and beautiful houses, and bonbons that melt in your mouth—like the ladies of the *beau monde* talk about. You see, I'm not so ignorant as you think."

"And who talks to you about those

things?" The girl did not answer. "I know; it is M. Victor Fournier." She raised her head quickly. "But you should not listen to him. Good girls shouldn't listen to those things; gentlemen who talk like that only laugh at you. If M. Victor said that to you——"

"M. Victor has said nothing to me; I scarcely know M. Victor. And who is he that he should laugh at me? He is only a 'grand seigneur de province' after all. M. Victor, indeed!"

Gerald almost gasped. "Grand seigneur de province!" How on earth had she got hold of that phrase, over the pronunciation of which she was indeed a little uncertain, though its meaning as a term of contempt was evidently pretty clear to her? After a short silence he got up, and kneeling on one of the wooden chairs, leant over it while he tilted himself backwards and forwards, and addressed her with a red face and all the impressiveness of which he was master.

"Babette," he said, "you have met somebody who would like to do you a great injury,

making you dissatisfied with your simple harmless country life, and with your own goodness and truth and honesty. But you mustn't listen to what he says, you mustn't indeed. If you do, you'll be awfully sorry for it, and worse than sorry. You don't know what gentlemen are : I do ; and I tell you the less you have to do with them the better."

"Why, you are a gentleman yourself," retorted she saucily, "though you're not so fine a one as——"

She stopped short; and Gerald continued :

"Look here, Babette, tell me who it is. You can trust me, you know."

She shook her head decidedly.

"Well, if you won't, I shall tell your father or your grandmother."

"Very well, you can tell them what you like," she said, laughing defiantly, while a dangerous light began to glitter in her eyes.

"I shall tell him," Gerald went on earnestly, "that you are in danger of being talked over by some scoundrel, who, just because he wears a cloth coat instead of a

blouse, you think is a model of all that is perfect and manly."

The girl continued to laugh, with her eyes fixed on some object behind him. He turned and saw the very person to whom he proposed to appeal—the gamekeeper Monnier, who had entered from an inner room in the course of their conversation, and who, it struck Gerald as he looked at him, was not the person to appeal to on any point more delicate than the snaring of a rabbit or the punishment of a poacher. Monnier was a middle-aged man, made prematurely old by open-air work, whose stooping shoulders, ferret eyes, and sinister expression made him look more like a breaker of the laws than a supporter of them.

"At your service, monsieur," said he, with grim respectfulness, and with a glance at his daughter which showed that there was a better understanding between them than Gerald would have liked to admit.

And the young man, noting the look of saucy defiance on the girl's face, and that of perfect comprehension of the situation on the

father's, saw that there was nothing left for him but to ask for his gun and to take his departure. When, however, he had said good-bye to Babette, and was at the door, Monnier followed him, and said, in a voice which was intended to be reassuring, though it had not that effect :

“Do not disturb yourself about my daughter, monsieur ; I look after her well.”

But Gerald returned to the gate, where he had left the gig, in much anxiety concerning his humble friend. He drove up the long avenue, and through the gate at the other end, into the paved space before the house, where he got down and knocked at the door, still in a state of deep abstraction.

Mr. Beresford's home was not an imposing residence. It was a long whitewashed house with a red-tiled roof, with two or three smaller buildings of the same unpretending pattern added on at the further end ; these contained the servants' offices, and close to them came the stable, and a small cottage where the coachman lived. It was hard to decide which was the front of the house, for

the principal entrance was the unpretending door upon the courtyard at which Gerald now stood, while the other and prettier side of the house had no door at all, entrance into the garden being by French-windows through the *salons* and *salle-à-manger*, straight on to the sandy path which skirted the little lawn.

The door was opened by a rough but good-natured looking servant in short stuff gown, white cap tied under the chin, and wooden shoes. She exclaimed on seeing him :

‘ Oh, monsieur, I am glad you have come. Mdlle. Beresford has arrived, and she is waiting in the *salon* while we get ready something to eat for her. And she looks so tired ! Oh, so tired, monsieur ! It is pitiful ! ’

Gerald’s face fell. Unaccustomed to strangers, shy with ladies, the rather awkward position in which he found himself had untold horrors for him. As he crept guiltily upstairs, and changed his coat and put on a new tie in honour of the dreaded Miss Beresford, a horrible longing seized him to have the horse put again into the gig, and to sneak back to Calais and beg Madame

Fournier to have mercy on his situation and come back to play hostess for him. However, he conquered this cowardly impulse, slunk downstairs, and nervously entered the *salon*, where he was told he should find the lady. At first he saw nothing but the back of Mr. Beresford's big armchair, drawn up close to the stove. Advancing slowly step by step, he found that it was occupied by a little feminine figure in a black dress, fast asleep, with her head hanging down on one side, her hands lying listlessly on her lap, and her feet—such little feet!—stuck up against the close stove. This attitude was reassuringly undignified, but Gerald could almost have given a shout of pleasurable relief on recognising in the pale tired face that of the little creature whom he had saved from falling on the pier that afternoon.

She did not wake up as he approached, so he sat down on a chair, with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, watching her, and wondering what she would say and what she would do when she opened her eyes.

Gerald made a shy but critical examination

of Miss Beresford as she slept on by the stove, and became every moment more certain that he should like her. She was so small, so pale, had such slender little hands, and such a weary little face, that the very sight of her roused in him a wish to do something for her, if it were only to lift up her head, as it hung down uncomfortably over the arm of her chair. She was as unlike as possible the tall, masculine-looking, handsomely dressed person he had pictured Mr. Beresford's daughter to be; and he was already endowing her with every sweet and mawkish attribute which helps to form a very young man's ideal of womanhood, when she raised her head with a start and a sigh, while Gerald drew himself up on his chair and blushed deeply—much more deeply than she did as she suddenly became aware of his presence. She drew down her feet, sat up in the chair, and held out her hand with great demureness. He got up, shot stiffly across the room to her, shook hands as if it was a painful and distasteful operation, and retreated at once with the appearance of being glad to be let off so easily.

“I am afraid I have come upon you unexpectedly, monsieur,” she said, rather sleepily, in French. “But my father——” She stopped, and, after looking at him for a few moments attentively, asked, “Are you English?”

“Yes, quite.”

“Ah, I thought you looked English; I seem to have seen you somewhere.”

“To-day—on the pier.”

“I remember now. You saved me from falling down, and picked up my rug; it was very kind of you. Did you know who I was?”

“No; I hadn’t the least idea you were coming, Miss Beresford, or I should certainly have met you. And Victor Fournier too, who was with me——”

She started into full wakefulness. “Was that M. Fournier, that handsome——” She stopped short, blushing, but evidently much pleased by the discovery.

These words reminded Gerald of the strange circumstances of her coming, and chilled him a little. They both remained silent for some

time, he rather disgusted, and she thoughtful. Then, glancing at him, she seemed to understand the expression of his face, and when she spoke again there was a timid and rather pleading tone in her voice.

“ I thought I should find my father here ; he told me by letter that I was to be prepared to come over at the end of March. I have not heard from him for two months now, and as some friends of mine were going as far as Dover, and I don't like travelling by myself, I took the opportunity of coming with them part of the way.”

“ Mr. Beresford will certainly be here in a few days now, mademoiselle ; in the meantime I will drive you over, if you like, to-morrow, to Madame Fournier's——”

“ Oh no ; I shouldn't like to go there—at least, not at once,” said she, blushing piteously.

“ Very well, mademoiselle. At any rate, I will go to Calais to-night, and tell them of your arrival.”

“ But why need you be in such a hurry ? I don't want you to have a cold drive

to-night on my account. Why can't you wait——”

She stopped short, and looked down uncomfortably. Delphine, the servant who opened the door to her, had prepared her for the coming of M. Gérald, in whom she, without any particular reason, had expected to find some staid secretary or dependent of the same generation as her father. The young fellow was evidently in the throes of a difficulty about etiquette which she considered more lightly, though she did not at first like to say so.

“They will be offended if they are not immediately informed of your coming, Miss Beresford,” insisted Gerald, anxious to escape the awkward duties of host. And as at that moment Delphine opened the door of the *salle-à-manger* and announced that dinner was ready, he ordered the gig to be brought round again in an hour.

Then they went in to dinner, and for the first few minutes Gerald was utterly borne down by a sense of his responsibilities as host, and gave all his attention to helping Miss

Beresford to soup, and to compiling elaborate little commonplaces about the discomforts of travelling, to which she paid very little heed, being ravenously hungry, and apparently not inclined for conversation. So that by the time the fish was on the table they had both dropped into silence. But Miss Beresford was beginning to look pinker and happier, and as the next course appeared she glanced at her companion and broke into a pleasant little laugh.

“What a curious ending to the day this is!” she exclaimed, in a more natural tone than he had yet heard from her. “Not a bit like what I expected.”

“Oh, of course you expected to find Mr. Beresford here.”

“Yes.” Then she sat back happily in her chair, and added simply, “I’m so glad he isn’t!”

Gerald, whose ideas concerning the relations between children and their parents ran in conventional lines, echoed feebly, “Glad he isn’t!”

“Yes, very glad,” she repeated calmly

then, with a sigh : “ I wish he wouldn’t come back from Nice at all ! I know I shan’t like him.”

Gerald was beginning to enjoy the unconventional *tête-à-tête*, when these utterances, which he scarcely knew whether to take seriously, disconcerted him.

“ It is long since you have seen him, then, Miss Beresford ? ”

“ I don’t remember him at all ; I only know what poor mamma used to tell me about him. I shan’t even recognise him from the old portrait I have of him when he was young ; for he told me in one of his letters that he is partly paralysed.”

“ What makes you think you won’t like him, Miss Beresford ? ”

“ Oh, everything. The way he treated poor mamma, for one thing—deserting her and leaving her for her own friends to support, and never caring what became of her or of me either, while we wandered about for years and years together, like a pair of tramps, living wherever it was cheap, dressing as best we could, never knowing what it was

to be out of debt, or to have any pleasure that wasn't thrown to us out of charity. If you had gone through all that, *you* wouldn't feel very grateful to the person to whom you owed such a life."

"No, I don't think I should," said Gerald heartily. "But it will be all right when you see him. I know Mr. Beresford, and I should think he must have been a very difficult sort of man for a wife to get on with; but he is too just to bear any ill-will towards you for her sake, I'm sure."

"Why should he? It is I who bear him ill-will for her sake. And she bore ill-will to me for his sake; so you see I have some cause for knowing that I shall hate him."

And, to Gerald's horror, her lips suddenly parted over a set of beautiful white teeth, and her little face wrinkled up into an expression of *impish* malevolence.

"You look quite frightened," said she, laughing, as her features relaxed into their usual form. "Did you think at first that I was a nice girl? People often do at first."

"I am sure you are," said he politely.

“Of course people can’t be as nice when they are low-spirited and miserable as they are when—when they feel better.”

“But I never do feel better; I’ve been soured. I’ve never been happy and I’ve never been young, and it’s too late for me to begin to learn how.”

“Too late! Oh no, it isn’t. It seems quite funny to hear you talk like that. When you are a little older you will know better. Let me give you some more *œufs à la neige*.”

“If you please. How very nice it is!” said Miss Beresford.

“Yes; Marie makes it beautifully. If you like sweets, I’ll take you to the best pastrycook’s in Calais in a day or two, where they’ve got some awfully nice things, and such *marengs*!”

“I don’t care much for *marengs*; I like tarts with cream in them, and chocolates.”

“Well, you shall taste them all,” said Gerald, thankful to have found a subject which she did not treat lugubriously. “There are some chocolates in the *salon*, and I told Delphine to light a fire there. Shall we take some

fruit with us, and go in there ? It is much cosier than the room where I met you."

Miss Beresford agreed, and they passed through the bare-looking *salon*, with polished floor and close stove, to a smaller room at the end of the suite, where a bright warm-looking carpet and an open fire-place seemed more English and home-like. Gerald pulled a low armchair to the fire for the lady, and, seating himself on a footstool at her feet, began to prepare fruit for her.

CHAPTER V.

DURING the five and a half years of his residence at "Les Bouleaux" Gerald Staunton had enjoyed so few of the pleasures of home-life, that this evening with Miss Beresford seemed to him a revelation of the joys of heaven.

"This is jolly!" said he, looking up at her, and smiling. The society of a young and intelligent human being, however soured, was entrancing after three months of solitary evenings, varied by discussion of robberies with the servants.

But she would not smile back. "I think I'm past caring for mere brightness and warmth," she said sententiously, "though, of course, it's better than being dull and cold. (No, I won't have that one; it's all brown

and soft in the middle, and you've pulled the stalk off.) Just think how humiliating it is for me to be sent for like a parcel, and left here to be inspected by everybody, to see if I shall 'do.' I hope I shan't do. I should wish I hadn't come if it were not for you."

"For me!"

"Yes. You are very kind to me, kinder than anybody has been for a long while. Tell me, who is the Miss M'Leod my father mentions in his letters, and what are the Fourniers like?"

"Miss M'Leod is housekeeper, secretary, companion, everything, to Mr. Beresford. She is a little dried-up old maid, who thinks herself very young and very fascinating; if you want to please her you must talk about sermons or the fashions. But she is very kind-hearted, and when you know her well you will like her."

"And the Fourniers?"

"Oh, they're very nice. They say M. Fournier is very avaricious and—well, that's all they do say about him; but he isn't unkind—nobody is, I think, unless you get

in their way ; and you won't get in his, any more than I do. And Madame Fournier is very fond of her children : there is Louise," Gerald blushed and Miss Beresford looked demurely intelligent, "and then, of course, there is Victor."

"Yes, that's the one I've got to marry. What is he like?"

"Oh, he's very handsome, and very much admired and run after. He's a good fellow too, and everybody likes him."

"Do you like him?"

"Yes."

"Not very much, or you wouldn't answer quite in that tone. Why don't you like him?"

"I do like him ; I see a great deal of him. If I answer rather grudgingly, it is because I'm meanly envious of his luck, I suppose ; he's the luckiest fellow I've ever met."

"Well, he won't be lucky much longer, for he will have a horrid wife."

"Oh, but even if he had, Victor is not the sort of man to whom that would matter much."

“Indeed!” said Miss Beresford sharply. And he was appalled by his own indiscretion. However, she went on with spirit and with the elfish look in her eyes which he had noticed before: “So much the better. He will go his way and I mine.”

“Why did you consent to come, if—if you feel like that?” suggested Gerald diffidently, in a low voice.

“Because there was nothing else for me to do. I’m tired of tossing about the world belonging to nowhere and nobody; and earning one’s living, as I should have had otherwise to do, is very hard and very dreary. And at any rate, if I marry this man I shall have a home; and if when he sees I’m only an ordinary insignificant little thing he declines to fulfil the bargain, well, at any rate,” with another glance of fiendish malice, “now my father has once had me here and owned me as his daughter, he can’t let me starve.”

“I should think a girl would rather starve than marry a man she did not love,” suggested Gerald, in a low voice.

“Oh no, she wouldn’t,” said Miss Beres-

ford bitterly. "French girls always do it, and lots of English ones, too. And the man one loves never has any m-m-money."

She broke down at last, and began to cry. The little suggestion of sentiment in the hard, practical, brown-eyed elf touched Gerald's heart, and he stroked her arm soothingly.

"Never mind, don't cry. Perhaps he'll earn some money, or get some left him, and come back just in time to marry you."

"No-o, he won't. He's gone away to America, and last time he wrote he was engaged to a rich girl out there. I hate her!" she cried, with another flash of fury.

"Were you very fond of him?"

"Ye-es, at first."

"I suppose he worshipped you?"

"No, he didn't do that exactly. There was another girl he liked better, but she had parents and brothers and sisters, and was very pretty, so of course she didn't like him as much as I, who had nothing and was plain."

"Oh, but you're not plain," cried Gerald, with quite earnest conviction. "And he

wasn't good enough for you if he didn't care about you more than that."

"Yes, he was. He was quite good enough for me ; anybody's good enough for me."

"Oh, but that's nonsense, you know," said Gerald, as, amused and touched by her childish petulance, he drew his footstool close to her, and, taking one of her little hands in his own, caressed the fragile fingers, and talked to her in the tone he would have used to a spoilt child of five crying over a doll.

"Nobody is good enough for you who doesn't like you very much indeed, as Victor will when he finds out what a dear, silly little thing you are, not a bit like the stiff affected girls he meets every day. And you will be as happy as a bird, and——"

The noise of wooden shoes was heard on the polished floor of the adjoining room, and the door was opened roughly by Delphine, who ingenuously stood for a moment, with her head a little on one side, admiring the picture which the two young people had had neither the time nor the wit to break up. Gerald had, indeed, dropped Miss Beresford's hand

just in time to give more than due significance to the fact that he had been holding it ; but the little black-robed girl was still occupying only that half of her chair which was nearest to her companion, and the footstool on which he was sitting was drawn close to her side. The easy-mannered rustic servant would have made some verbal comment on the scene, if Gerald had not hastily prevented her by asking what she wanted.

“The carriage is round, monsieur, *when* you are ready,” said the big girl, with saucy sympathetic good-humour.

“Thank you, Delphine, I’m coming,” said Gerald, springing up, red to the roots of his hair.

“And, monsieur, Marie told me to tell you that la mère Benoit has just come to say——”

“Oh, I can’t listen to old Benoit’s stories now. Go and tell Henri to light the lamps ; he always forgets them.”

“Very well, monsieur,” said Delphine, with unusual and irritating courtesy ; and she left the room and shut the door with a

last glance of benevolent enjoyment. But Miss Beresford did not see it ; she had kept her eyes on the fire to hide from the servant that she had been crying. As soon as the door closed she looked up ; her great brown eyes were soft and glistening from recent tears, and the red lips of her little mouth were quivering.

“ Don’t go,” said she softly, putting out her hand. “ I shall be so lonely here all by myself if you go, and I shall cry again. Let the people know I’ve come to-morrow ; I’m so tired to-night, I want just this one night’s peace. To-morrow they can come and look at me, and eat me up if they like. But do stay now.”

At her first words Gerald had thrown himself into a chair near her with an alacrity which had encouraged her to make her voice more persuasive and to lay her hand coaxingly upon his sleeve. But as she went on speaking and pleading with him he grew suddenly shy and stiff without any clear reason, knowing only that the voice of this little creature whom he had been treating as a child had

a sweetness such as no music had ever had for him, and that listening to her quite passively as he was doing, with his face turned away from her and his eyes fixed on the knob at the end of the little brass poker, was an altogether new, pleasant, and somewhat unaccountable experience. When she had finished he got up and said slowly, in a voice which sounded prim: "I must go, Miss Beresford. French people like the Fourniers are much more—er—much more particular about etiquette and things like that than English people of the same class; and they would be extremely offended if they were to find out that you had been here a day before they knew anything about it. It might lead to their breaking off all—er—all existing arrangements with Mr. Beresford."

"Oh, and the parcel would be returned upon his hands; that is what you mean, I suppose," said Miss Beresford, in a hard and scoffing tone. "I was forgetting how precious I have become now that my father has found a use for me, and how important it is that I should be well taken care of now that

I have thoroughly learnt how to take care of myself."

Gerald stared in bewilderment at the impudent little termagant, in whom every trace of the sweet-voiced fairy of a few moments ago had utterly disappeared. But even as he looked she changed back again to her gentler self, and made her black eyes soft as she smiled at him.

"Yes, you're quite right, I know," she said humbly, and with a blush. "You see, I've been independent so long—for it was I who took care of mamma, not mamma of me—that I'm half a savage. When shall I see you again?"

She had risen to her feet, and she looked so much more unhappy at the prospect of being left alone than she had done while reciting the tale of her woes as she sat by the fire eating sweets, that it went to Gerald's heart to leave her.

"I shall stay in Calais to-night, but I will come back as early as ever I can to-morrow. I should think Madame Fournier will come in the morning, and perhaps make you go back

with her. But anyhow I will come, you may be sure of that; but you won't want to see me any more when you've seen Victor."

"Oh yes, I shall. Do you know what I felt this evening for the first time in my life, when we were sitting there, and you were listening so patiently to my grumbling? I felt that I had a brother at last, to whom I could tell everything I thought, whether it was silly or not, without fear of being laughed at."

She was too ignorant of the world to know how oddly she had mistaken the offices of a brother, and Gerald, equally simple-minded, accepted the position with eagerness.

"You may indeed, Miss Beresford. I'm not clever enough myself to laugh at anybody, and you can always say whatever you like to me——"

In the delight, new to both of them, of sympathetic companionship, they might have gone on arranging the compact indefinitely, if at this point the door had not been again opened by Delphine, whose words were uttered to the accompaniment of the sobs of an unseen

woman, who had followed the servant as far as the next room.

“ Pardon, monsieur, it is not my fault that I am interrupting you again. La mère Benoit refuses to go away until she has seen you. She says that M. Beresford always hears what a poor person has to say, and as you are here in his place, as it were——”

“ Where is she, Delphine ? Of course I will see her.”

The girl jerked her head in the direction of the next room, and Gerald went in and gently touched the shoulder of a bent old woman, who sobbed and moaned, and seemed utterly unable to avail herself of the presence of the young gentleman to detail the cause of her distress.

“ Come, come, tell the gentleman about thy grandson,” said Delphine, swooping down upon the little crone and trying to lift her bodily into an attitude of respectful narration.

But they failed to draw anything but inarticulate murmurings from the old peasant until a little black figure glided past the muscular young servant, and kneeling down,

slipped her arms round la mère Benoit's neck, and said in French, with a strong foreign accent :

“ Tell *me* what thy grandson has done.”

“ He is lost ; the wolf-devil has got him,” sobbed the old woman, after staring dully at her interrogator until the sympathy in the big brown eyes moved her to speech.

“ This is what she says, monsieur, mademoiselle ; little Jules saw the wolf-devil a week ago, and you know that always brings misfortune ; and now to-day he went across the dunes to Moreau's farm with a load of wood on his shoulders, and he has never come back. And *la mère* thinks he may have been robbed by the wolf-devil of the few sous he got for the wood, which we tell her is impossible, since it is only those who have something worth taking who get robbed. It is more possible that he may have lost the money and have returned to hunt for it ; or perhaps he may have had his foot caught in a rabbit-hole and hurt himself. But anyway, as I tell her, it is useless to trouble monsieur——”

“No, it isn’t,” said Gerald promptly. “I will go at once on to the dunes and look for Jules. Henri shall take *la mère* home to her cottage; and you, Delphine, must go too, for Henri would never dare to come back alone while this stupid wolf-story is about. Miss Beresford, you won’t be frightened, will you? Marie the cook will be left in the house, and she has plenty of courage.”

And, without waiting for an answer, he dashed out of the room, and they heard him mounting the staircase. When he returned to the *salon*, Miss Beresford had her hat on, and Delphine was fastening the buttons on her ulster.

“I am going with you, Mr. Staunton,” said she quietly. “Delphine has just told me the story, and it seems this wolf-creature never attacks anybody who is not alone. No, I’m not tired; I can walk fast, and I shall not be in your way; but you shan’t go alone.”

He made a few objections; but as she scarcely paid civil attention to them, he contented himself with ascertaining that she was warmly wrapped up, and they left the house

together. It was nearly eight o'clock, and quite dark. As they passed Henri standing by the gig, Gerald told him to take it back into the stable until his return, and saying simply "Come along" to his companion, he and she walked the whole length of the long white house, over the square-paved courtyard; and then, passing a little pond on the left (which looked, with its background of trees, like a yawning black pit in the darkness), they walked on together along a rough grass-grown path between an ill-kept hedge on the one side and a tangled plantation on the other, followed by a potato-field, and then by more plantation.

"It's very dark; if I were alone I should be frightened," said Miss Beresford at last. In spite of the excitement of the strange place and the novel circumstances of the walk, she had become sleepy and tired again; and though she could walk on steadily at a good pace, her brain was in a sort of excited confusion, which made her glad that her companion did not seem to want entertainment from her.

“Hush!” said he softly. “Look there!”

She tried to follow his glance into the tangle of the still almost leafless plantation, but she could see nothing.

“Are you afraid to stand here one moment alone?”

“No-o,” doubtfully.

She had scarcely uttered the word when Gerald sprang away from her, and as he did so, she heard the crackling of dry branches and the rustle of last summer’s long dead grasses, and she knew that he was in pursuit of some one or some thing. The chase did not last long. In a few moments she heard a sort of squeaking cry and a whining boy’s voice.

“Oh, M. Monnier, let me go—let me go! Indeed, I saw nothing—I saw nothing; and I swear I will never tell anyone: I swear it, I swear it! Oh, my poor grandmother! Oh, don’t kill me, please!”

“Get up, Jules; what are you talking about? I don’t want to kill you. Come here.”

And Gerald dragged out on to the rough path where Miss Beresford was standing a dishevelled, ill-fed-looking boy of twelve, who

had turned suddenly taciturn, and who refused to answer any questions as he stood trembling with cold and fright in the grasp of his captor, who led him back to "Les Bouleaux," restored him to his grandmother, who had not yet left the house, and gave orders that both should have supper in the kitchen before they returned home. Then Gerald went into the *salon* to say good-bye to Miss Beresford, who had accompanied him and his prize home very quietly.

"Good-night, Miss Beresford; the gig is waiting to take me to Calais. Delphine and Marie will do all they can to make you comfortable. I shall see you to-morrow; don't be dull. Good-night."

"Good-night," said she, giving him her hand and smiling. "Be sure you come early to-morrow—as early as ever you can; and don't forget to bring me some more chocolates."

So he left her and got into the gig. On the way to Calais he had plenty to think about; for besides that most interesting discovery of a sweet little sister in the once-

dreaded Miss Beresford, the words that Jules had uttered in the belief that he was addressing Monnier the gamekeeper had roused some strange suspicions in his mind.

“I wish Mr. Beresford were here,” thought he. “I think I shall write and tell him about this business; he will make Jules speak, if anybody can.”

He went straight to the house of the Fourniers, and announced Miss Beresford’s arrival. Madame Fournier asked him to spend the night there, but he did not see Victor, who returned home long after the rest of the family were asleep. Next morning he was at the factory before Victor was up, but he found there a telegram which for several reasons gave him great relief.

“*From M. Beresford, Hotel Normandy, Paris.*

“*To M. Staunton, Fabrique Fournier,*

“*Saint Pierre-lès-Calais.*

“*Arrived here from Nice last night. Shall be at Calais at 12.53 to-night.*”

“Now everything will be all right again!” said Gerald to himself joyfully.

CHAPTER VI.

It was a quarter to six o'clock on the evening of Thursday, March 29th, that Mr. Beresford, of the firm of Fournier and Beresford, lace manufacturers, arrived in Paris on his way from Nice, and drove straight to the Hôtel Normandy, where rooms on the third floor had been engaged for him by telegraph some days before. He grumbled exceedingly on the way thither at the terrible inconvenience either alternative of staircase or lift would cause him, on account of the partial paralysis of his left side, which had for nearly five years made locomotion difficult for him. The little prim English lady, Miss M'Leod, who was his devoted nurse, secretary, companion, butt, and scapegoat, condoled with him on this misfortune with perfect sincerity, although

she knew that it was parsimony and not poverty which prevented him from installing himself in comfort and luxury on the first floor. She was a curious study, this small, spare, haughty, high-dried lady, by herself so insignificant that the handsome dresses in which she delighted to array her tiny person were quite without effect, and the height at which she carried her little pinched nose and shrivelled chin gave her, not the dignity she craved, but the stiff air of a doll of our grandmothers' time, which, after having been carefully packed away for half a century, has been discovered and repaired and decked out in clothes of modern fashion at a great sacrifice of congruity. But having had the luck to see, four years and a half ago, Mr. Beresford's advertisement for "an English lady of tact and refinement as companion-housekeeper to a middle-aged invalid," Miss M'Leod, after quieting those maidenly scruples which are never so strong as at forty, had been interviewed, approved of, and installed in a position for which, by every little crook in her narrow mind, every little whim of her kind

heart, she seemed peculiarly fitted. Away from Mr. Beresford she was nothing; as the right hand of the invalid oracle of "Les Bouleaux" she was quite a great lady. So, in return for a courteous deference, in which she was not clever enough to discern "chaff," she yielded him a devotion more complete and absorbing than worshipper at altar ever paid, and was gradually becoming as necessary to him as he was to her.

As they were driving from the station to the hotel, Mr. Beresford slowly drew his head far enough out of the multitude of wraps in which his neck was swathed to speak with sufficient clearness to be understood. The paralytic stroke which had deprived him of the free use of his right arm and leg had affected his speech in a curious manner, producing the effect of his tongue being intractable, and apt to get in the way. Miss M'Leod, however, seldom failed to gather his meaning, and she now understood him to grumble at the amazing remissness of Mr. Smith in not turning up at the station to meet him. Miss M'Leod drew up her little

person with an electric shock of dignified disgust, and Mr. Beresford gave a dry chuckle on noticing it.

“What has poor Smith done to offend you, that the very mention of his name is always enough to turn your smiles into frowns?” asked he.

But he knew; for the housekeeper was as jealous of her influence with her employer as ever fair lady was of her power over her lover, and “that Mr. Smith” ran her very close in Mr. Beresford’s confidence, and was the thorn in the little lady’s side. He was the cleverest of the travellers for the firm, and it was well understood that in that matter of predicting the coming fashions in lace, which had done so much for the firm’s fortunes, Mr. Beresford never prophesied unless Mr. Smith knew. During the three months she had just spent at Nice, Miss M’Leod had been spared the sight of the hated one, though she had had to read aloud his business letters, and to affect admiration of their sagacity; but to hear his absence regretted in the very first minutes of their arrival in Paris was too much for her patience.

“Nothing, monsieur,” said she in French, the language Mr. Beresford now habitually used; “but I think it would have been more courteous of him to meet you, since he knew at what time you would arrive.”

“Well, well, it is the first time he has failed to do so, and some accident must have prevented his coming. Or perhaps he was at the station and we missed him.”

“In that case he will certainly be at the hotel within a few minutes of your arrival there,” said Miss M’Leod, sincerely hoping that the obnoxious clerk would fail to put in an appearance that evening, and thus give her a legitimate ground of complaint against him.

“Come, tell me the reason of your dislike to poor Smith; you are a lady of far too much sense to take an unreasonable prejudice, especially against a man who admires you so much as he does.”

But the implied compliment left her frigid. She cast about for a reason, and found one that would serve.

“Mr. Smith takes too much credit to him-

self for the work he does for you, which is, after all, of quite a subordinate kind, and consists merely in following out your suggestions. He absolutely boasts of his authority with you ; and I am sure I would not wish to say anything against a man behind his back, but I certainly do believe that, while working for you, he is working for himself too."

"Naturally. That is the secret of getting well served, to make your own interest that of your servants."

"But if those interests should happen to run different ways, the servant will follow his own," said Miss M'Leod, whose Christianity was apt to grow weak as she grew warm.

"How do you mean ?" asked Mr. Beresford, indulgent and amused.

"Why, that I believe—not that I would for the world say anything against a person without proof—that Mr. Smith is more bent on making his own fortune than on making yours."

"I dare say he is human enough for that."

“And I have seen him, out of a packet of letters which he has taken from his pocket to read to you, slip back one or two, with a quick glance at you, as if afraid that you should see them. I believe he has secret communications with some one,” she finished, with a romance-inspired air of mystery.

“Well, he may have communications from the Prince of Darkness himself, as long as the intelligence he obtains from him is accurate and useful.”

And Miss M’Leod, to whom even profanity lost its wickedness coming from the lips of her employer, shut up her mouth tightly, as if to force back any more disregarded revelations; and they reached the Hôtel Normandy in silence.

Mr. Smith was not there, had not even called there, did not arrive during dinner, at the end of which meal Miss M’Leod was secretly triumphant, Mr. Beresford evidently uneasy. He refused to go to bed, and insisted on sitting up, on the chance of his trusted clerk’s arrival. At last she suggested that, if Mr. Beresford knew his address, he should be

sent for at once. Pierre could go in a *fiacre* with the message. Now Pierre was Mr. Beresford's valet, a faithful but incompetent old servitor, who had been engaged out of charity, or to illustrate Mr. Beresford's theory that fidelity and intelligence in any being except a dog are always found in inverse proportion. The journey from Nice having confused the old man's faculties more than ever, his master hesitated at Miss M'Leod's suggestion.

"I suppose it would be too much to ask *you* to be kind enough to drive as far as the Rue de la Bienfaisance to the Hotel Alexandra, where Smith is staying?" said he, with courtesy which did not hide the fact that the suggestion was a command. "If you would not mind seeing Smith if he is in, or waiting for him if he is out, I should be exceedingly indebted to you. You will then insist, in my name, on knowing fully the reason of his unaccountable non-appearance, and, if possible, you will bring him back with you."

Miss M'Leod rose stiffly, bowed obedience

without speaking, and left the room to get ready for this distasteful expedition. When she returned to take the last commands before starting, Mr. Beresford showed a malicious disposition to rally her which was cleverly calculated to ensure her speedy return.

“It is very confiding on my part to send you instead of Pierre, since everyone knows that a lady in search of a gentleman is only less expeditious than a gentleman in search of a lady. I won’t even ask you to promise not to let Smith tell the *cocher* to come a long way round.”

Mr. Beresford was sitting by the low square fireplace, where a wood fire was glowing. At the opposite side of the room, which was large and served as bed and sitting room, the old valet, who was scarcely less infirm than his master, was pottering about with an incapable air of being busy with his master’s portman-teau. The white cloth and the dessert had been removed from the table, which was now covered by a mossy-looking, heavily fringed velvet cloth, to which a couple of wax candles, in tall plated candlesticks that stood upon it a

yard apart, gave a lugubrious suggestion of a pall-covered coffin. Miss M'Leod, standing near the door in her ladylike black silk gown and heavily trimmed black mantle, shuddered at her employer's indelicate pleasantry.

"I can assure you I shall not make any attempt to detain *Mr. Smith*," said she haughtily, with a spirited implication that, had the gentleman been more agreeable to her, he would have found it difficult to resist her fascinations.

"Very well, very well," said Mr. Beresford, nodding his head slowly; "on that assurance I will trust you. Tell him, if you like to be severe, that it does not look well for an old cripple of fifty-two to be ready for business discussion after a tiring journey, while he, a mere lad of five-and-thirty, is sitting at ease over his claret and thinks that business will do in the morning. Tell him I shall expect him up to ten o'clock, and that I hope to be in possession of all the intelligence he has to give me before midnight; and ask him to bring with him the letters from Madame d'Argentan, M. Bontaud, and M. de

Breteuil on the subject of the orders we have had from them."

"What are the three names? I will write them down."

"No, no, it is not necessary. Say the three large orders we have just received. I am really much obliged to you for going, especially when you are so tired."

"Oh, monsieur, if you can sit up to talk business, surely I——"

"The greed of gain would keep a dormouse awake. You need not come to me again to-night; you can go straight to your room and rest. Good-night."

He rose slowly and raised her small gloved hand to his lips; difficult as movement was to him, he never omitted this nightly ceremony, which was indeed but a small price to pay for the slavish devotion it did much towards purchasing. It was the signal for Pierre to take his stand behind his master's chair, ready to afford his pompous but hindering services in getting him to bed. Miss M'Leod, as usual, received this salute with downcast eyes, looked up with a gracious

smile and a curtesy, and retired, with a pleasant feeling of satisfaction with herself and her own position, from her employer's presence. Mr. Beresford, though he was only of the middle height, with a round back and the awkward stoop of the short-sighted, had a dignity about his massive grey-haired head, silver-streaked beard, and dark eyes shining from under thick eyebrows that were almost white, which made it easy to do homage to him.

Almost reconciled to her disagreeable task, Miss M'Leod went down the wide shallow-stepped staircase, which she preferred to the lift, as she thought the sweep of her silk train behind her made her more impressive than the mere package one became when pulled up and down in that little square box. Then she sent for a *fiacre*, and gave the address of the Hôtel Alexandra as she stepped in with a stately air. She was half-way there, and was composing an opening speech which should fulfil Mr. Beresford's wishes whilst letting the abhorred Smith know that he must keep his distance, when a voice

shouting to the driver made her lower the window to see what was the matter. A commissionaire sitting beside the driver of another *fiacre*, which had apparently followed hers at full speed, was telling her own driver to stop, as he jumped down and came to the window.

“The gentleman of whom madame is in search has just arrived at the Hôtel Normandy,” said the commissionaire, raising his cap politely.

She recognised the man as the one who had called her *fiacre*, and ordered the driver to return, very thankful that she had not had to fulfil her task. She was congratulating herself that she should not have to see Mr. Smith at all, as she passed Mr. Beresford’s door and heard the clerk’s full, clear, rich voice on the other side, when the handle was turned, and a little fat man, with a black bullet head and twinkling clever black eyes—just such a man as the voice foretold—came out, and seizing her frigid reluctant hand, took it in both his and shook it warmly.

“My dear, dear Miss M’Leod,” as if

bursting to express the enthusiasm he felt about her, "I am so sorry, so inexpressibly sorry that you should have had to turn out in the damp and the cold on my account. I've had to blow up dear old B. about it, I have really. He might have trusted me not to neglect my business," he went on, ignoring her evident disgust at his disrespectful mention of his employer. "When we poor working devils get an order from a swell, you know, we must cool our hoofs in his anteroom at his own time; and M. de Breteuil—I dare say you've heard of him, he's one of the tip-top nobs here"—Miss M'Leod shuddered—"having done us the favour to order a lot of lace for which he wants special designs, sent for me just as I was starting to meet you and dear B. at the station. Then, after keeping me for two whole hours looking at two cursed bad pictures of dumpy Frenchwomen we wouldn't have for barmaids in London—no, don't go," said he, detaining her by the jetted sleeve of her mantle, obtusely failing or pretending to fail to understand her sudden turning away—"well, he had me in, looked

down at me some miles, and told me to send one of the principals of the firm to him. I've just told old B., and he's nearly off his head about it," added he, jerking his round black head back in the direction of Mr. Beresford's room. "That just touches his dignity, you know. So he's writing to my lord himself, and he vows he'll have the gentleman here himself to-morrow morning. Shouldn't wonder if he did. Old B. can do wonders when his back's up."

"Writing himself! He can't; you should have let him dictate the letter to you. I must go and do it myself." Her hand was already on the door.

Mr. Smith did not attempt to stop her, except by a shrug of the shoulders and a significant twitch of his eyebrows.

"Go in if you like, my dear lady, but he won't let you write that letter. He's in one of his black humours, and whatever sort of scrawl he manages to produce will be much to the point, I fancy."

Miss M'Leod's hand dropped. Mr. Beresford could make himself very unpleasant

indeed when he was annoyed, and even devotion grew cooler at the thought of the look with which he would receive an unbidden intruder.

“If you do go in,” continued Mr. Smith magnanimously, “say I sent you. My shoulders are broad enough to bear the blame, and my credit with him is good enough for him to forgive you if you use my authority.”

Whether or not there was a touch of malice in this speech, it fired the lady at once. “I use no authority but that of Mr. Beresford himself, sir; and if it came to a question of your credit against mine, the balance would perhaps not be so much in your favour as you imagine.”

She was turning away most haughtily to go to her room, when her enemy, with a chuckling good-humoured laugh which exasperated her more than a chorus of blasphemies, seized her right hand, and insisted upon shaking it warmly, while he said in a tone in which even she could detect sly mockery, “Well, well, don’t let such a trifle disturb the friendship of old pals like you and

me. I'm sure I would rather see old B. and his authority too at the bottom of the sea than contradict a lady. I'm afraid I shan't be able to go down to 'Les Bouleaux' with you to-morrow evening, but I promise you I'll come down on the following morning without fail—and the hours between now and then will seem very long."

Sour-faced, indignant, she suffered the hand-pressure she could not escape, but made no attempt to echo his affectionate sentiments: the moment he let her hand fall she forgot her dignity, and scurried off to her own room like a mouse dropped from the jaws of a cat.

But the poor lady had not seen or heard the last of her tormentor. On the following morning, when, as usual at eleven o'clock, she went towards Mr. Beresford's room to offer her services to read or write for him, just as her little knuckles touched the panels of the door to give a modest rap, she caught the sound of the clerk's hated voice, and, retreating hastily to her room, she put on her bonnet, determined to take the opportunity of

a little shopping in Paris and to avoid her enemy at the same time. As she reached the entrance of the hotel on her way out, she noticed a little group of waiters watching an arrival with unusual interest.

“C’est M. de Breteuil, le millionnaire galant,” said one of the group to another who had just joined them.

Miss M’Leod was not very well versed in the scandals of Paris, less perhaps from lack of interest than of opportunity ; but she had heard of this man and of the marvellous vitality of his notoriety, and she stood aside with some curiosity, on pretence of gathering up the train which no change of fashion could induce her to discard, to see the bold bad man pass. She saw him step out of his dainty little dark-coloured *coupé*, which, with its pair of small, long-tailed, black horses and its pair of dark-liveried fur-caped servants, looked like the sombre freak of a blonde *demi-mondaine*. An Englishman would have looked upon the turn-out—from the showy high-stepping horses, with their foam-covered bits and heads held tightly in with the

bearing-rein, to the little black toy behind them with the coroneted gilt monogram L. B. on the panels—as he would have looked at the advertisement car of a circus: but in Paris it was the envy and admiration of men as well as women. The owner of the carriage bore the stamp of his reputation with gratifying clearness. Miss M'Leod felt her curiosity stimulated instead of lessened as she took a keen and comprehensive survey of the tall, slight, erect gentleman, better dressed than most fashionable Frenchmen, whose dark clear-cut face and easy bearing impressed her so much that she passed upon him the mental comment of the imaginative milliner: "He might be a prince!"

"Did you see him?" said in her ear the voice she loathed, as soon as M. de Breteuil had passed. "He wouldn't take any notice of me, though I came down on purpose to receive him. However, I'm going up again, and he'll have to be civil to me in the guv'nor's presence. I'm too useful to old B. for him to stand by and see me insulted by any popinjay foreigner."

“ M. de Breteuil is every inch a gentleman : anyone with any knowledge of good society can see that,” said Miss M’Leod superciliously.

“ Oh yes, he’s as fine a gentleman as hair-dye and a good tailor can make him. You’re mashed, I see. Well, well, I should be content to look as well at his age.”

“ His age !” echoed Miss M’Leod involuntarily. “ Why, he can’t be more than thirty !”

“ He can, though ; he can be more by a good ten years. Well, I must follow my lord upstairs, I suppose. *Au revoir*, Miss M’Leod : if I don’t see you again before you start I wish you a pleasant journey ; you won’t be so dull at ‘ Les Bouleaux ’ when young Miss Beresford arrives to keep you company.”

And with this artfully barbed speech, for the housekeeper was already madly jealous of her employer’s daughter, the little man turned and trotted upstairs.

When Miss M’Leod returned from her walk, she saw the little black *coupé* driving away ; meeting Pierre outside his master’s door, sh

learnt that both Mr. Smith and M. de Breteuil had gone, and she therefore hastened to present herself to Mr. Beresford. He was in one of his moods of almost absolute silence, as usual after a business talk with Mr. Smith ; but the aggrieved housekeeper chose to think that the latter had been "making mischief," and that the reflective taciturnity with which Mr. Beresford endured her reading of the *Figaro* rather than listened to it was the result not so much of deep thought over the fluctuations of the lace-market as of temporary estrangement from herself. It was something to believe, however, that for the present her enemy was removed ; and it was with no welcome in her eyes that she saw the clerk's fat, happy, good-humoured face at the Gare du Nord that evening, when she and Mr. Beresford drove up on the way to continue their journey to "Les Bouleaux,"

He raised his round hat to her, and gave a too familiar nod to his employer. "I couldn't get you a carriage to yourselves, in spite of the Baron's pass," said he, looking in cheerfully at the window of the *fiacre*. "The train

is going to be very full, and these d—d Frenchmen just take your tips and then pack you in like sardines all the same. I could only get you one to yourselves by paying double fare for each unoccupied seat.”

“No, no, you don’t mean to say you’ve done that!” stammered Mr. Beresford.

“No, it’s all right,” laughed Smith, in mischievous delight at the fright he had given to his employer’s parsimony. “I’ve arranged that you are not to have more than two other people with you, so you can both put your feet up and be comfortable. One must consider the lady, you know,” he added politely.

It was evident that the lady would rather have travelled in the luggage-van than be considered by him; but Mr. Smith was unctuously impervious to snubs. He led them, armed with the pass he had obtained from one of the directors who knew Mr. Beresford, to a compartment the further corners of which were already occupied by two gentlemen. The guard unlocked the door for them: Mr. Beresford was carefully

helped in and seated in one corner, while Miss M'Leod took the fourth, which was opposite to him. Mr. Smith gave her a cheering assurance at parting, as he stood on the platform, beaming up at her with his twinkling black eyes through the spectacles he sometimes wore.

“It won't be long before I see you again, my dear lady. I have one more call to make on our estimable friend, the king of snobs, M. Louis de Breteuil, who has condescended to give me an audience at half-past eleven to-morrow morning; that done, the claims of duty will be satisfied, and I shall fly to your feet.”

At the mention of M. de Breteuil's name, both the strangers in the carriage turned their heads quickly towards the speaker. Mr. Beresford, who noticed everything, saw this, and frowned slightly at his clerk's indiscreet mention of such an important client. Mr. Smith, seeing nothing of all this, continued to babble happily on.

“You will have a little pleasant excitement at ‘Les Bouleaux’ now. Have you seen the

account of old Dupont's being robbed the other day? It appears they've been having quite a gay old time about there with a mysterious robber, who is said to be a *loup-garou*, and to take a lot of killing. So you had better not go about after dark until I come down to take care of you, Miss M'Leod. Ah! you're off; good-bye, and a safe journey to you. The train gets in at Calais at 12.53; and I've telegraphed to Staunton this morning, and he'll be sure to meet you. Good-bye!"

Again, at the mention of the name Staunton, the two strangers looked round. Both men were past middle age; the elder, a short red-faced man with snow-white hair and moustache, wore a carefully brushed coat and hat of the fashion of some years ago, and bore himself with an old-fashioned affectation of military swagger which would have been altogether offensive had it not suggested to the shrewd a spirited struggle against adverse fortune. The younger of the two by a few years was evidently a man of more assured position. He was tall and broad, with keen candid eyes

and features still handsome, though his hair, moustache, and close-cut beard were iron-grey. Both men were evidently English.

"Curious coincidence, the mention of both those names," suggested the former, in a voice meant only for his friend.

"Coincidence! Something more than that, perhaps," said the other thoughtfully; and he looked with much attention from the invalid gentleman to the little faded lady as the train steamed out of the station.

Mr. Beresford had already closed his eyes, not for sleep, but as an intimation that he did not wish to be disturbed. In a few minutes, however, he felt a touch upon his arm, and found that the housekeeper was sitting by his side.

"Mr. Beresford," she whispered very low in his ear, 'please forgive me for disturbing you, but I must warn you against those two men. They keep watching us with their eyes half closed in a way that makes me nervous. I believe they are'—she formed the last word with her mouth only—"thieves."

Mr. Beresford did not answer, but he glanced at the seat she had left as an intimation for her to return to it. She did so at once, snubbed, as she had expected to be. But her words, also as she had expected, had had their effect, and from under his travelling-cap the invalid took a very careful survey of the travellers.

CHAPTER VII.

To a person who travels but seldom, a night-journey in an express train is of itself exciting; but when that person's only companions are two powerful-looking strangers of suspicious manners, and a paralysed friend, too sleepy even to listen to a whisper of warning, the excitement grows too strong to be pleasant. So, during the whole of the fifty minutes' run between Paris and Creil, the first stopping-place, Miss M'Leod sat upright, keeping strict surveillance on the two unknown Englishmen, and debating with herself whether, in case of attack, she should first make a rush for the communicator, and then show fight with her umbrella, or make play with the latter trusty weapon at the first sign of danger. The spirited little lady's

valour got so much the better of her discretion that, when the taller of the strangers got up to reach his travelling-cap, a restraining glance from Mr. Beresford was only just in time to save him from being harpooned. When the train stopped at Creil, however, and the strangers both thrust their heads out of window, on the principle of making the most of their opportunities of seeing France, the paralytic found a chance of assuring his companion that her anxiety was thrown away.

“What you think suspicious in them is probably suspicion of us,” said he. “They are both the rawest of Englishmen, old as they are : hearing us talk French, they believe us to be French : believing that, conscience shows them in us a pair of detectives, told off specially to pounce upon the bundle of bad cigars and the bottle of cognac, which will be smashed before they get to London, on which England expects every man to evade the duty.”

She looked only half convinced ; so he added, “I’ll prove to you they are harmless before we go another mile.”

No sooner had the train started again, than Mr. Beresford asked courteously in English if they would forgive the fussiness of an invalid, and shut the window at their end of the compartment. The taller of the two complied at once, and instantly seized the opportunity of opening conversation with the heaven-sent stranger who, in this wild land, had perfect command of the British tongue.

“I hope you will pardon the question, but are you not a fellow-countryman of ours? I thought you were French as long as you spoke French; but you speak English so well that I can hardly believe you are not an Englishman.”

The most formal stiffness could scarcely have been proof against the genial straightforwardness of the gentleman's manner, and Mr. Beresford answered at once, “You are right in both guesses: I was wholly an Englishman up to the age of forty-six; but for the last six years I have been a naturalized Frenchman. I need not say that my French I had picked up some time before then.”

The other had taken a seat nearer to the

paralyzed man, whose impeded speech was rather difficult for a stranger to understand. After a few general remarks, in the course of which both the visitors were disappointed to find that their resident countryman did not sweepingly condemn all French institutions, the taller of the two asked Mr. Beresford if he had been to the great sale which had taken place a few days before in the hôtel of the Parisian millionaire, M. de Breteuil.

“No,” answered the other; “I only arrived in Paris from Nice last night, although, as it happened, it was chiefly business with this very M. de Breteuil which forced me to break my journey to my own home.”

“Ah! then he is a friend of yours?”

“No, a client. M. de Breteuil would be extremely indignant to hear those terms confounded. I am afraid you must have heard my clerk, at the station, claim acquaintance with him in rather indiscreet language; but I have myself little to find fault with in the gentleman’s dealings with me.”

“To tell the truth, my friend and I are a good deal interested and puzzled about him.”

The other stranger was listening with deep attention. "We were both at this sale yesterday: he on business, I on pleasure. We had heard a great deal about a famous Murillo of his, which was to be sold, as we hear all this extravagant gentleman's things get sold sooner or later, because the owner was tired of it. But on examination this masterpiece proved to be nothing but a copy of a picture in a church at Seville, a copy so flagrant—not that I could have detected it myself, for I know little or nothing about pictures—that my friend here declares that it is almost incredible that a connoisseur could be taken in by it."

"It is doubtful whether M. de Breteuil is a connoisseur. It is the *métier* of such men as he to get all out of life that is to be got; art must yield its pleasures as well as sport and the ballet, though all those tastes don't get equally well cultivated, and it is perhaps easier to pass judgment on the turn of an ankle or the points of a horse than on the merits of a picture."

Both the other men laughed, and the

white-haired one broke into the conversation with a voice in which a shade of unnecessary familiarity took the place of the ease which a more assured social position gave to his friend.

“ I went myself to Paris expressly to see the picture, and I can tell you I was disappointed, unmistakably disappointed. And if a swell can’t choose his own pictures he ought at least to choose his picture-buyers, and not trust his reputation in the hands of some swindling thief who is a better judge of the canvas than he is of the painting.”

From the warm personal interest with which he said this, it was easy to guess that the speaker thought he could have fulfilled the commission better himself.

“ I am sorry your journey should have been without result,” said Mr. Beresford to the other stranger.

“ Oh, my own visit to Paris was merely for pleasure,” he answered, “ with the exception of some fruitless inquiries about the son of a man who was once a friend of mine,

who has now been lost sight of for some years."

"Indeed! An Englishman?"

"Yes; he was a lad of eighteen when he disappeared; he threw up a situation he had in London in order to come to France to make inquiries about—about some family affairs, and he has never been heard of in England from that day to this."

"How long ago was that?"

"Six years, or about that."

"And the young fellow's name?"

"Staunton—Gerald Staunton."

Mr. Beresford glanced at Miss M'Leod, who could not restrain an exclamation of astonishment.

"I think I can help you," said he quietly.

"To tell you the truth, I have been hoping that you might, for I heard the gentleman who saw you off at the station mention the name of Staunton; and I, superstitiously perhaps, took it for a good omen. Is the man to whom you referred——"

"Gerald Staunton? Yes. He is a clerk in my employment."

“Impossible!”

“I met the lad in Paris when he was in a sad strait, and I took him up.”

“A very generous act.”

“Not quite that. I am not a philanthropist. But a man whom you pluck from the mire will usually turn out either a very good servant or a very bad one, and I can generally trust my judgment upon the material in my hand.”

“And you are satisfied in this case?”

“Perfectly. If you are going as far as Calais you will see him to-night; Gerald will be at the station to meet us.”

“Yes, yes, I had intended to cross to-night,” said the other, who had grown much excited over the discovery. “But I almost think I shall spend the night at Calais, in order to see Gerald and have a talk with him.”

“If you wish to do that, I hope you will do me the honour to accept such poor hospitality as I can offer you for the night. I live three miles out of Calais, and Staunton lives with me.”

“Oh, you are too kind; I could not think of——”

“You will be conferring a great favour upon me if you will come; I am, as you see, a cripple, forced to lead the life of a hermit, and grateful for any echoes from the outer world. Besides, I shall be very glad of some conversation with a gentleman who knew Staunton’s father; and I am—as my nurse opposite is trying to make me understand—not fit to talk any more just now.”

His voice had been growing weaker and weaker, and he gave his name almost in a whisper to the stranger, who in turn introduced himself as Mr. Albert Shaw, of the London Stock Exchange. And the white-haired man, who was at least as talkative as his friend, and who had been panting for a chance of joining in the conversation, here thrust in the announcement that his name was Blair, and that he was extremely honoured to make Mr. Beresford’s acquaintance. The latter hardly seemed reciprocally overwhelmed, nor did he extend his invita-

tion to the seedily-smart humble friend, who looked as if he would like it.

Mr. Beresford was evidently exhausted by the fatigue of talking through the noise of revolving wheels, and he lay back in his corner again, with closed eyes and with a drawn expression upon his face which alarmed his faithful companion, who propped him up and dosed him with brandy-and-water and smelling-salts, until he begged her to leave him alone; and she insisted on running to the buffet at Amiens, where the train stopped for twelve minutes, and the two Englishmen rushed out for coffee and cognac, to get him some chocolate, which Mr. Beresford could always eat, and in the sustaining power of which she had great faith.

It was seven minutes past ten when the train went on again; by this time there had come upon all the travellers a wish to get what sleep they could, and within ten minutes of leaving Amiens each corner of the carriage held a silent and torpid human being in some unlovely attitude of disturbed and disturbing slumber. But they one and all settled

gradually into stillness and quietness as the train went on, until not a limb moved, not a head stirred except to fall forward heavily as sleep took a stronger hold upon them. Miss M'Leod held out the longest, with the dutiful watchfulness of the nurse. But as she saw Mr. Beresford's eyes close and heard his regular breathing grow deep in sleep, she felt that she might safely indulge the craving for slumber which was becoming indeed too strong to be resisted. It seemed to her, as she made one last languid effort to sit up and keep awake, that the air was becoming strangely heavy and oppressive ; she glanced up at the ventilator over the door next to which she sat, and saw that it was shut ; turning her tired eyes towards the opposite one she found that shut also, and the next moment her flagging senses were stimulated into sudden liveliness by the horrible appearance of the man who had given his name as Blair. His head was hanging down, his mouth was wide open, his travelling-cap had fallen off, his wavy white hair fell disordered about a face the colour of which had changed

from red to purple, while his difficult, stertorous breathing gave her what seemed a convincing proof that he was in an apoplexy.

She started up and raised her hand towards the ventilator, but fell staggering back into her seat, sick, giddy, and somnolent. Again she tried to rouse her failing senses, and after endeavouring in vain to wake Mr. Beresford, who sat opposite to her, by pulling the sleeve of his left arm, she called to him, and said : “ Wake up ! do wake up ! Something will happen to us, something has happened to—us—all ! Wake up ! ”

But her voice sounded weak and thin in her own dulled ears, and Mr. Beresford, whose head had sunk deep into the comforter round his neck, remained deaf and inert. She had just sense enough left to know that they were all in some danger and to feel despair at her own powerlessness to avert it, when the gradual slackening of the train told her that they were coming into a station. A great throb of thankfulness lifted her heart, and then she sank into unconsciousness.

The station into which they were running

was Abbeville, but neither the stopping nor the starting of the train disturbed the four travellers. The guard had looked in at the window, but as Mr. Blair sat at the end of the carriage, and the little blind was drawn down behind him, the guard did not see enough of his figure to guess that anything was wrong. So on they went through the darkness, and neither the shriek of the engine nor the rumble of the wheels, nor the wind which began to howl as they drew northwards and to drive sheets of pattering rain against the windows, disturbed any of the slumbering occupants of the carriage, until all at once the violent slamming of one of the doors roused Mr. Shaw and Mr. Beresford into partial consciousness. The former raised his head, muttered an indistinct question, and grew drowsy again for a few moments, until the feeble voice of the paralysed man calling to him, and a gust of cold air and rain coming in through the door, made him open his eyes, and this time more intelligently. For some seconds he still sat blinking before him without much sense of what he saw or of what he

heard, when a second loud noise like that which had first aroused him startled him into full wakefulness, and he suddenly became aware at the same moment of two facts : the first, that his companion in the opposite corner was ill ; the second, that the door by which he was sitting had in some unaccountable manner got open, and that it was the noise made by its banging to which had woke him up. It was open again at the moment of his discovery, and the wind was driving the rain in upon his rug and upon that of his friend, which had fallen to the floor.

He at once shut the door and turned the handle securely, and then, placing himself beside his friend Blair, he tried to rouse the unconscious man, whose breathing was still heavier and his appearance more alarming than when he had frightened Miss M'Leod. Mr. Shaw himself still felt curiously heavy and stupid, and thankful for the windy gusts of air coming through the window, the glass of which he had let down, in spite of the rain, to revive his companion. He was at first too much absorbed to pay any but the

most monosyllabic attention to the weak queries of the paralytic in the corner, who, philosopher as he liked to be considered, grew as effeminate and querulous as other invalids in moments of excitement, and kept up an intermittent fire of questions as to what the matter was, who it was that had opened the door, and what the station was they had stopped at last. He also was too sleepy at first to wait for answers or to understand them when they were given ; but he went on asking all the same, until the movement and the cold wind and the voices had in turn roused Miss M'Leod, who started to her feet in fright as soon as she woke up, and called shrilly: "What's the matter? What has happened?"

"I don't know, I don't know; do sit down," quavered Mr. Beresford testily. "When I woke up just now the door at that end was open, and the wind and rain pouring in like a hurricane. And I feel quite sick with the noise and the cold, and I want you to give me my flask."

She found it for him, and filled the little

silver cup rather clumsily, for her head ached, and her hands were shaking ; and then, the invalid's wants being satisfied when she had pulled up his rug round him, and drawn his cap over his ears and his comforter over his chin, she turned her ministering attentions to the white-haired Englishman, who, supported by the arms of his friend, was slowly recovering consciousness.

“Is he ill?” asked Mr. Beresford, becoming at last aware that some one in the carriage was more in need of attention than himself.

“Yes, very ill, I am afraid ; I can't think what is the matter with him.”

“Something seems to me to be the matter with us all,” said Mr. Beresford, after a short pause, during which, curiosity getting the better of his fear of the draught, he had cautiously withdrawn his face far enough out of the ramparts of cap and comforter to note the pallid faces and heavy eyes of his companions. Mr. Shaw started, and glanced over his shoulder at him ; and the eyes of both men, as they exchanged long, scrutinis-

ing looks, read in those of the other a chilling bewildering suspicion.

“You don’t think, do you——” began Mr. Shaw, and hesitated.

But the paralysis which had affected the other’s limbs had left his head clear enough, and thought shaped itself quickly in his brain.

“Miss M’Leod,” he called sharply though still feebly, “come here.” She came obediently. He gave her some directions in a low tone of voice, and she took down his bag, turned over the contents under his orders until she came upon a little common tin cash-box, which he himself examined and found untouched, and then took his purse from the pocket he directed. He looked through that also, and these movements, although carried out very quietly, did not escape the notice of Mr. Shaw.

“I hope to Heaven,” he said, in a low voice, “that it’s all right. For robbery would mean ruin to one of us. Here, Blair, my man, wake up. Ah, that’s better! Drink a little of this; the stuffy carriage has nearly poisoned all of us.”

“Poisoned!” cried the little housekeeper shrilly. “Oh, don’t say that, it frightens me! I can’t understand it all. I believe there is something wrong—some one must have got in.”

“Got in!” echoed suddenly the voice of Mr. Blair, who had not yet spoken. “Who’s got in?”

He sat up and looked about him; the deep colour of his face had faded a little, but was still some shades darker than his naturally florid complexion; his silver-white hair, which he wore rather long, was tossed wildly about, and his blue eyes were dilated and bloodshot.

“What did you say about some one getting in?” he asked, turning hazily towards the lady.

“Why, we are all so stupid and heavy, and—and the door was open just now, and—and I thought that—that something must—might—have happened,” said the little woman, stammering in some confusion as she observed the intentness with which the little man’s eyes were fixed upon her, and seemed to grow

rounder and more prominent as he bent further forward, as if trying hard to take in every word that she was saying.

His manner frightened her ; she began to think he must be mad, and could scarcely restrain a shriek, nervous and excited as she was, when, still leaning on the right elbow, by which he supported himself upon the seat, he raised his right hand slowly and waveringly towards his breast, and thrust it into his coat. She thought he was going to pull out a revolver, and she was sliding in terror on to her trembling knees, when Mr. Shaw's genial voice attracted his friend's attention, and reassured her.

"Come, come, Blair, it's all right. At least, I hope so. There's nothing like being woke up by a noise in the night for giving one the jumps. We'd better just make sure that we haven't let our purses with our tickets fall out into the mud when the door flew open, and then pull ourselves together and get another nap. It's only twenty past eleven ; we have another hour and a half of it," said he, pulling out his watch.

But even as he spoke his face was less cheerful than his words, and his eyes followed carefully every movement of Blair's shaking fingers, as they fumbled with the buttons of his coat, and dallied nervously about them.

"It's all right. I—I needn't look," murmured the white-haired man, with faltering lips ; and he let his hand fall down to his side again.

"Well, yes, yes, of course it's all right. Still, I think I'd make sure," whispered the other earnestly.

It was impossible for the other two people in the carriage not to have their attention riveted, in spite of themselves, upon the hurried words, the nervous movements, which told them something serious was at stake. No invalid's selfishness could have been proof against the anguish of fear which was driving the ruddy colour from Blair's face and causing his limbs to shake as with palsy ; and Mr. Beresford watched him with interest as keen as that of sympathetic little Miss M'Leod, who could scarcely keep her lips from begging

the unhappy man to end suspense which had become her own.

At last, with one quick desperate movement, he tore open his coat, and, regardless who saw him, drew out from his inner breast-pocket a large dark leather pocket-book, and opened it upon his knees. One glance told him the worst. With a long moan, he let his hands fall to his sides, and his white head fell upon his breast. A shiver ran through everyone in the compartment; for that one sound told a story of ruin and misery that needed no comment.

Mr. Shaw, after a pause of utter silence in the carriage, took the open pocket-book in his hands; with the exception of some visiting-cards and an unreceipted bill, it was empty.

“The notes were in it, you are sure!” said he energetically.

At that moment, a tiny dark object fell from one of the folds of Blair’s coat on to the crumpled rug at his feet. Mr. Shaw saw it fall, looked for, found it, and put it in his pocket without remark, as he waited for his friend’s answer.

“Certain ; I swear,” said Blair hoarsely.

“When did you look at them last ?”

“At the hotel, two minutes before we started. I counted them.”

“You have the numbers ?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s all right. We can telegraph from the very next station to stop them.”

“It’s no use. The man who stole them must be the devil himself. Why, I’ve never been alone, and nobody in this country but you and M. de Breteuil knew that I had so much as a five-pound note about me. Do I look like a man who would be expected to carry about with him £12,000 ?”

The mention of the amount caused a sensation in the carriage. Mr. Beresford’s head twitched, Miss M’Leod uttered a cry of horror.

“You have been followed from London and watched,” said Mr. Shaw decisively. “If Lord Keighley hadn’t been such a confounded doddering old idiot, he would have given you a blank cheque.”

“He wouldn’t trust anybody with a blank

cheque; he always gives me notes for his commissions."

"More fool he. See the result in the fright this has given us."

"Fright! By Heaven, it's ruin!"

"No, no; we will telegraph at Boulogne. Dictate the numbers to me—quick."

The unhappy man felt in his outer pocket for his purse, but his face grew livid when, on opening it, he found that the paper on which he had written down the numbers of the notes had disappeared. With a cry like a maniac, he sprang up, and would have opened the door to fling himself out, had not Mr. Shaw, by the muscular force of a stronger body, held him back.

The voice of the paralytic in the corner, weak still, but in tones so firm, so clear, as to enforce attention, broke in upon the struggling men.

"Forgive me for making a suggestion, but in such a terrible emergency help is the only courtesy. I understand the notes were confided to Mr. Blair by some one who probably kept a copy of the numbers. In two minutes

we shall be at Verton. Write a telegram to him, telling your loss both of notes and numbers, and he will be able to stop them as quickly as you could yourselves."

The train was already slackening into Verton as Mr. Shaw scribbled the last word of the telegram. They called the station-master into the compartment, and Mr. Beresford gave him the despatch, and, coming to the assistance of the two Englishmen with their halting French, explained that a serious robbery had been committed, and requested him to telegraph along the line, and especially to Boulogne and Calais, that a look-out might be kept for any suspicious person who might be crossing to England that night. The compartment had been entered while they were all asleep, he said, and they had been roused by the noise made by the banging of the door, which the thief had not shut behind him on quitting the carriage. The official, dying to take an important position in this affair, and to have his name mentioned in the papers, was attentive, effusive, and fussy, and left the compartment with the air of a person

who could lay his fingers within half an hour upon the very man, stolen notes and all.

“But,” suggested Mr. Shaw, when the station-master had left the carriage and the train was once more on its way, “I did not understand you to say anything about the very extraordinary circumstance of our all being so soundly asleep.”

“Because that was a matter in which he could not help us. We must find out that mystery for ourselves ; but if you will follow my directions I fancy we shall not have far to seek.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THERE was dead silence in the railway-carriage as Mr. Shaw, on Mr. Beresford's suggestion, made a thorough search into every corner for some clue to the means by which they had all been stupefied before the perpetration of the robbery. Blair sat staring before him in stupid unthinking silence, utterly crushed by the blow which had fallen upon him. Miss M'Leod hopped from place to place, as she was directed, to facilitate the search, like a limp dejected bird, her dignity for the moment forgotten. Mr. Beresford was not satisfied when the searcher sat down, declaring that there was nothing further for them to discover—the rest must be left to the police, and he wished he had a couple of London detectives over here, instead of these

red-tape-bound French officials who couldn't understand him.

"We must have been under the influence of some narcotic, probably chloroform, and there must be some trace of it about. Why, the air is heavy with it still," said Mr. Beresford.

But the stockbroker, who had hunted in the net above their heads, turned over the cushions, and peered under the seats with matches, was hard to convince, and still harder to silence. Therefore the crippled gentleman set his own little detective to work, and Miss M'Leod obediently passed her hand along the seat until, when she got to the other end of the carriage, she suddenly cried: "There is a large stain here, on the cushion behind Mr. Blair's head. And it is wet."

Everyone but the cripple looked, touched, sniffed; the sickly odour which had overpowered them all came from that spot, where the light-drab cloth was stained a darker tint for the space of some two feet square, and even as they looked the stain was slowly

spreading. Passing his hand upwards over the saturated surface of the cloth, while, fascinated, the eyes of the rest followed every movement of his fingers, Mr. Shaw felt something hard just at the place where the cushioned side of the carriage protrudes to accommodate the head and back of the traveller. A little further examination discovered a neat slit along the line made by one of the straight creases in the cloth leading to a button. By means of this slit a flat glass bottle had been introduced into the stuffing of the cushion, just far enough from the end of the carriage not to come in contact with the head of the traveller who might sit in the corner. Blair, roused by the discovery from heavy apathy into furious excitement, wanted to pull the bottle out : but Mr. Shaw prevented this.

“ We had better leave it just as it is,” said he gravely. “ Everything depends on finding how, when, and by whom it was put there. Look, the bottle has been placed on one side, and the cork is there, only out of the bottle. Wonder what the cork’s for.”

“To prevent our being overpowered too soon after leaving Paris, I should say,” broke in Mr. Beresford. “The cork was probably put in so that the jolting of the train should gradually force it out, which cannot have happened until after we left Amiens, as we none of us felt sleepy till then.”

“I cannot understand when the bottle can have been introduced. It must have taken some time, for everything has been done most neatly; and yet it must have been put there after we had taken our seats.”

“Did you leave your places before the train started?”

“Yes, for just enough time to go to the buffet.”

“Ah, that’s it! You were watched, certainly by more than one person, probably by half a dozen.”

“But we got the guard to lock the door.”

“That may make the search easier; perhaps some one may have been seen to unlock it and enter the carriage.”

“But it was still locked on our return!”

“Still, it must have been during that

absence that the mischief was done, for you never left the carriage again except at Amiens, where the only person who came in was the guard, who helped Miss M'Leod out and stayed talking to me until she got in again."

"The chloroform must have been introduced while we were asleep," suggested poor Blair.

"If we had been too sound asleep to notice all that hanky-panky going on with the cushion, there would have been no need for chloroform at all," said Mr. Shaw decisively.

But talk as they might, and as they did, until they got to Calais, there was no other conclusion to come to than that the unseen robbery which had just been committed in their very presence was, from all points of view, impossible; and poor Blair, in spite of their assurances that the telegram to Lord Keighley would certainly reach him in time for him to stop payment of the notes, was scarcely sane by the time the train drew near to Calais. He showed a dull surprise when Mr. Shaw, on whom, in this emergency, he

leaned helplessly, expressed his intention of adhering to his acceptance of Mr. Beresford's invitation to "Les Bouleaux."

"Then I will come into Calais to-morrow and go back to Paris if necessary, and make a regular British fuss about the matter, and have all the officials on the line questioned, and kick up such a deuce of a row about it that they shall arrest somebody, if only for the sake of getting rid of me."

"Let me warn you not to set about overturning heaven and earth without some authority, consular or other, for here in France it is even more unusual than in England to get justice by force of lungs and fists," said Mr. Beresford quietly. "And if the police wanted to get rid of you by the arrest of somebody, they would probably shut up you yourself on some trivial charge of disturbance of the public peace, just long enough for the thief to get well out of reach."

"Well, well, I can't do better than act under your advice, at any rate," said the other good-humouredly. "And you, Blair, must not lose a moment's time when you get

to England in going to Lord Keighley, wherever he may be, and insisting upon seeing him at once, even if he is in bed."

"If I ever reach England," said Blair, in deepest despondency.

For one moment the blank stare of utter hopelessness in the unhappy man's eyes seemed to make his friend hesitate, but only for a moment; then he laid his hand upon Blair's shoulder with a heartiness which made the touch almost a blow.

"Come, pull yourself together, man. This is not the sort of misfortune one can afford to sit down and look at. If you will only rally your pluck, and work as energetically on your side of the Channel as I will on mine, we'll have that money back and save our character as sure as my name's what it is."

The genial heartiness of his tone did seem to revive the old man's spirits a little, and as the train drew into the Calais station he began to roll up his rug with the air of a man who entertained the possibility of his wanting it again.

The telegraphing along the line had already

done its work ; as at Boulogne, the platforms on both sides of the train were thronged with men, some in police or railway uniform, some in blouse, all somewhat evidently on the watch. As the guard who visited each compartment for tickets during the course of the journey had assured Mr. Shaw, it was clear that no person leaving the train after the robbery was once made known could cross to England that night without leaving a minute description of himself or herself in the hands of the French police. As an extra precaution the letter-boxes in the stations of Boulogne and Calais and their neighbourhood were watched, and a police-officer told off at each telegraph-office to take note of the despatches which might be sent through them. Within one minute of the stopping of the train, and before any of the passengers were allowed to descend, the guard who had travelled with the train, accompanied by the Calais station-master and a police-officer, came up to the door of the compartment where the robbery was alleged to have been committed, and after the last had taken down notes of all the

circumstances from each of the four occupants of the carriage in turn, he asked most respectfully whether, considering the grave nature of the loss and the exceptionally puzzling character of the whole occurrence, they would one and all submit to be searched, the gentlemen where they sat and in his presence, the lady in the hotel attached to the station, by two respectable women who were there awaiting his orders.

Mr. Shaw was the only one of the four who objected to this infringement of the rights of a British subject, even Miss M'Leod's dignity being overawed by a sense of the strong necessities of the case. But on the officers politely putting it to his good sense and good feeling whether it became the first man who clamoured for investigation to be the first to object to it, and pointing out that even Mr. Beresford, an invalid and a well-known and respected inhabitant of the neighbourhood, was ready to undergo the ordeal, he too submitted. Miss M'Leod was then allowed to leave the carriage, and conducted by a very courteous gentleman with a fierce

black moustache, who might well have been a friend come to meet her, though he was really a policeman in plain clothes, to a room in the Hôtel de la Gare, at the door of which two respectable-looking women received her and led her in.

The rest of the passengers were then allowed to leave the train, and the guard having quitted the suspected compartment, a second policeman got in, and the three travellers submitted to a thorough and exhaustive search of their property and their persons in the presence of the station-master. The very lining of their hats and boots was examined, the soles and heels of the latter cut into, not a stitch or a button left unnoticed. As for the personal luggage they had with them in the compartment, both Mr. Shaw and Mr. Beresford offered to leave theirs until the morning, as the carriage was to be locked and guarded for the night. Shaw's rug and bag were given back to him after examination, and the three then descended to the platform, where they found old Pierre, to whom rumours of an accident had

brought visions of his master's death and his own consequent descent to the pauperism from which Mr. Beresford's freak had lifted him.

The three gentlemen proceeded straight to the buffet of the Hôtel de la Gare, where poor old Blair, but for the restraining influence of his friend, would have refreshed himself to the point of forgetting not only his loss, but the journey he had still before him. In very few minutes, with the elasticity of the born adventurer, he had revived sufficiently to take stock, according to his habit, of the people around him; and perceiving at a table near him a very beautiful woman, attended by a neat-looking maid, he instinctively drew himself together, cocked his hat, and twirled his white moustache, with happy indifference as to which of the two his bearing should impress.

"Deuced fine-looking woman that!" said he, with a tone and look which recalled caricatures of the "old bucks" of the Regency.

"Yes, very handsome," assented his less susceptible friend, with a glance at the lady

which took in more than the beauty which had attracted the other.

Mr. Beresford, sitting on a chair behind them, was looking in the same direction. Noticing this, Blair thought his own comment worth repeating to him.

“Yes,” he answered. “And, if I am not very much mistaken, she is a woman whom I had pointed out to me in Paris some years ago, when she was, I fancy, in not quite the same circumstances as she appears to be at present.”

Scenting a scandal, Blair drew nearer; but he was disappointed. For Pierre came doddering up at that moment, to tell his master that the *carriole* was waiting outside the station; and Mr. Beresford, with an apology for offering his left hand to Blair, and with kind expressions of hope that the lost money would soon be recovered, left the buffet on his servant's arm, begging Mr. Shaw not to hurry his leave-taking with his friend, as he himself should be a long time making his slow way to the carriage. He had scarcely left the buffet, when Gerald

Staunton came in from the opposite door, which led to the interior of the hotel, accompanied by Miss M'Leod, who had just been through the ordeal of being searched. He walked straight up to the lady who had been the object of so much admiration, watched by the two Englishmen.

"Mr. Beresford has arrived, madame," said he in English. "That is the house-keeper, as I thought. She is too shy to come up and speak to you."

Madame de Lancry had been waiting with Gerald for the arrival of Mr. Beresford, whom she was anxious to see. The young fellow had left her on catching sight of Miss M'Leod, as she was conducted through the room into the hotel; and when the latter reappeared after the search she gave him full details of the robbery which had taken place in the train. Gerald had scarcely finished giving a rough outline of the occurrence to Madame de Lancry, when, meeting the eyes of Mr. Shaw fixed full upon him, he started, hesitated, and then, making a step forward as the elder man did the same, found his hand grasped with a

warmth of greeting he had not known for years.

“Mr. Shaw!” “Gerald, my boy!” said they at the same moment, and wrung each other’s hands a second time without more words. Gerald’s father and Mr. Shaw had been firm friends for many years, and the latter had been the very last to yield to the universal belief in Staunton’s guilt: that he had yielded to it at last, Gerald knew; and the knowledge sent a shaft of reproach from his mild brown eyes.

“Why have you buried yourself away from us all so long? It was not kind of you, Gerald. Don’t you want to see old England again?”

“You know why I came to France, Mr. Shaw. I said then that I would never return to England until I had cleared my father’s name. For the last year I have almost given up hope of ever doing either the one or the other, until—until to-night.” And the young fellow, who was much excited, glanced with passionate gratitude, which could not fail to strike Mr. Shaw’s attention, at the beautiful

lady, who was still sitting at the table beside which he had been standing when he caught sight of his old friend.

Both gentlemen noticed with surprise that a great change had passed over her during their brief greetings, that her statuesque face was now lit up with excitement, and that a strange fire burned in her long eyes, as she looked rapidly from the one to the other, rose in haste from her seat, and put her hand on Gerald's shoulder.

"I want you to introduce your friend to me," said she imperatively.

The young fellow was so much startled by her abrupt and unexpected vehemence, that for one moment he hesitated. Her hand, still on his shoulder, moved impatiently.

"Your father—think of your father," she whispered quickly. "I can help you better, faster, by knowing your father's friend."

"Mr. Shaw," said he, "Madame de Lanery wishes me to introduce you to her. She has been kind enough——"

But the lady was too impatient to stand upon ceremony; she had held out her hand

at the first mention of her name, and cut Gerald short by saying, "I am very sorry to hear that you have been the victim of a serious robbery. I sincerely trust that the thieves will soon be discovered."

"You are very kind. I sincerely trust so too, though it is not I, but my friend, who is the victim."

"Indeed!" said Madame de Lancry, whose interest in the robbery seemed hardly as strong as her words about it.

"Yes," said Mr. Shaw, who did not mind a careless listener, provided he was left to talk uninterruptedly. "A most extraordinary thing—in fact, a most mysterious affair. My friend goes to Paris, charged with a commission from an English nobleman to buy a certain picture, said to be a masterpiece, at the sale of a Parisian millionaire. He carries with him a very large sum of money; but, discovering the painting to be a mere copy, he starts on his journey back to England, with the money still in his keeping—about his person, in fact. He and all the rest of the occupants of the compartment in

which he travels are, by the most mysterious means, put under the influence of a narcotic ; and, on being awakened by the slamming of one of the doors of the carriage, he wakes to find his money gone."

To all this narration, the greater part of which she had already heard from Gerald, Madame de Lancry listened with boredom which she scarcely took the pains to hide ; but his concluding sentence suddenly changed her impatient indifference into fiery interest.

"The strangest thing of all," prosed on Mr. Shaw, whose rapid and monotonous utterance made even the story of a new and sensational robbery unattractive, "is that the only persons who knew what a large sum my poor friend had about him were Lord Keighley, myself, and the possessor of the picture, M. de Breteuil."

"M. de Breteuil !" she echoed, in quite a low voice, but with excited breathlessness, which made both gentlemen look at her curiously. "*He* knew, you say ?"

"Yes, I believe that he knew. But what difference can that make ?"

She did not answer; the flash of vivid interest in her face settled into a glow of excitement so steady, so tigerish, that Mr. Shaw decided, as he noticed the hungry look of her crimson lips parted over closed teeth, the quivering delicate nostrils and dilated eyes, that she was a dangerous woman whose apparent interest in Gerald was much to be regretted. He had, however, for the moment forgotten all about Blair and Mr. Beresford in the interest this strangely capricious woman undoubtedly excited in him, when the prim and rather disgusted voice of Miss M'Leod at his elbow recalled him to remembrance of the discourtesy he was guilty of in keeping his host so long waiting.

“Mr. Beresford has begged me not on any account to hurry you, Mr. Shaw, but only to ask——”

“I beg a thousand pardons,” said he hastily; and turning to the other lady, “Madame, I am very grateful to you for your kind interest in the son of an old friend of mine; I hope you will persuade him to return to his friends in England.”

He bowed and was about to take his leave of her, when she said quickly, holding out her hand and detaining him with a strong nervous pressure, "You are not crossing to-night? You are staying here?"

"Yes. Gerald's friend, Mr. Beresford, has most kindly offered me an opportunity of renewing my acquaintance with the boy."

"Ah!" she cried shortly, and then turned to the young man. "Mr. Beresford's château is quite close to Calais, I think you told me, Gerald?"

"Yes, madame. 'Les Bouleaux' is about three miles off."

She turned again impulsively to Mr. Shaw, whose hand she still held.

"Will you do me the favour of coming to see me to-morrow? I am staying in the hotel here with my husband; he is in ill-health, but he will be most happy to see you." She had gradually moved a few steps, so that, as if on her way to leave the room, she stood between Mr. Shaw and the rest of the group. She looked earnestly into his face, as she added in a voice only loud

enough for him to hear, "Come without fail, at whatever time you please, but without fail. I don't know how your friend's money was taken, but I know who took it." Mr. Shaw started. She hurried on still more impressively, "I know more than that. I can give you the clue to the mystery about Mr. Staunton's disappearance: I can, I swear it."

"But, madame, I—I——"

"You cannot understand these rash and apparently wild confidences to a stranger, perhaps? But I know the world, and I can trust your face, as—as I could—and did that of your dead friend Staunton."

"Dead!"

"Yes, dead. The people are leaving the room for the boat," she continued, as a burly excited Englishman, turning to hurry up his wife and two children, backed into her on his way to the door. "And your poor friend is looking at you anxiously. I must not say any more to you now. Don't mistrust me because *my* face is no longer candid, but for Gerald's sake come and see me to-morrow."

She let his hand go, and detained Gerald for one moment as the two older men and the rigid little housekeeper went out.

“I saw your Mr. Beresford; he came in just now while you were looking for Miss M’Leod,” she said, with her hand laid affectionately upon his arm. “I knew him at once from your description, and I studied his appearance as closely as I could.”

“Well, and what did you think of him, madame? Hasn’t he a good, wise face?”

“Yes, wise certainly, and good in the sense of blameless. But I am disappointed in him, Gerald; he looks cold, and too prudent and unenthusiastic to work very hard to right another man’s wrong. I hope more from your other friend, Mr. Shaw: you must persuade him, if he needs persuasion, to come and see me to-morrow.”

“And you will tell him—all you say you know about my father’s disappearance? Oh, madame, why will you not tell me?”

“My boy, believe me, I am doing the best for you. You may trust me as you trust yourself. I dare not tell you yet more

than I have told you—that the instinct which makes you believe your father was murdered is, I have reason to think, a right one. I know very little more myself, but I will never rest until I do know more, and when I can put you fairly on the track I will. Do you believe me—trust me?”

The beauty of her face was no longer listless and languid; it was noble, inspired, though the inspiration was perhaps not all of heaven. Gerald pressed the hand she gave him without answering except by a look of unutterable gratitude, and watched her with eyes alight with the fire of reawakened hope, as, followed by her maid, she pressed through the now hurrying crowd of travellers towards her room. When she had disappeared he remembered suddenly that the *carriole* was waiting for him, and, running out of the room and through the station, he found that Mr. Beresford and Miss M’Leod and old Pierre were already seated in the interior of the vehicle, and that Mr. Shaw was standing beside the fat horse, waiting for him, and examining with some curiosity the homely-

looking two-wheeled carriage, in shape like a covered market-cart, which is so popular in the country in Northern France.

From out of the black depths of the *carriole* Mr. Beresford's voice, not in his philosophical, but in his querulous tones, grumbled at Gerald's long absence; and the young fellow sprang up on to the front seat and helped Mr. Shaw to take his place beside him with impulsive energy unusual to his gentle nature. And he whipped up the old horse till the stone-paved streets of Calais rang with the clatter of wheels and hoofs, and as they crossed the moat for the second time at the other side of the town, going slowly over the wooden drawbridge, he turned to his companion, and said in a low voice, "Shall I drive you into Calais when I come to business to-morrow morning, Mr. Shaw?"

"Well, I doubt whether I should be able to see Madame de Lancry so early in the day; I should hardly like to venture, in spite of what she said," he answered, in his usual voice. "I will call upon her later, on my way to the train."

Gerald looked disappointed ; but not liking to make any objection, he drove on in silence until they had quitted the stone-paved road that led into Saint-Pierre, and, turning to the left, were jogging quietly along the sandy, monotonous road towards "Les Bouleaux." A very dreary drive it was at all times, and on this cold March night, with a drizzling rain falling, a cutting east wind driving straight into their faces, and thoughts of robbery, of murder, and of a ruined and desperate man now crossing the rough sea, made both the travellers on the front seat of the *carriole* gloomy and anxious.

"What's the matter, Gerald?" asked the elder man, noticing that his companion stared with strange intentness at a little thicket of stunted straggling trees which they were approaching, on the left-hand side of the road. Mr. Shaw's eyesight was keen enough, yet he saw nothing either interesting or alarming in the confusion of bare twigs and branches which the weak moonlight showed him.

"Oh, we're all as nervous as cats about here just now," answered the young fellow,

trying to laugh. “There have been a lot of small robberies committed in the neighbourhood during the winter, and this affair in the train I’ve just heard about has given me a bad attack of the bogey-fever—that’s all.”

Mr. Shaw shivered. He was not in the least superstitious, and he feared both death and danger as little as most men; yet, as they drove on again in silence through the cold night air and the rainy mist, even the strong belief that was upon him that he was on the right road towards helping two friends out of their difficulties could not stifle a sudden and unaccountable feeling that this visit to “*Les Bouleaux*” would bring misfortune to somebody.

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